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## THORN IN THE FLESH

When Rupert Thorn meets Sophy, he is acting as a travel-agency host on Lake Como whilst working on his literary masterpiece. After listening to her reminiscences, he speedily decides that there is far more money in her life-story than in his poetry. And so there might have been. But his crafty plans are completely upset by two ravishing young ladies who hunt him from pillar to post (and from pillow to bed-post, including his own). Finally Rupert is forced to admit that the softest flesh will blunt the toughest thorn. . . .

*By the same Author :*

( CRITIC AND POLISH )  
PAINLESS EXTRACTIONS  
SMILING TIGERS

# THORN IN THE FLESH

OLIVER ANDERSON

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LONDON

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ARTHUR BARKER LTD.

To  
TUG WILSON THE TIGER,  
AND HIS MERRY BAND OF THREE-STRIPERS

MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY  
MORRISON AND GIBB LIMITED, LONDON AND EDINBURGH

" . . . so I scrambled over the rocks, and there he was. Stark naked on a shooting-stick, reading *The Financial Times*."

" My word, how very savoury."

" You think so? I found it rather discouraging."

" Then you should undergo a thorough medical examination without an instant's delay, for either you're losing your eyesight or your glands have turned into dried peas."

Rose Petal flicked her cigarette-stub into the moonlit waters of Lake Como and shuddered ecstatically. " What a slasher ! So lean and lithe and on-the-prowl. He ought to have claws and whiskers and a long flexible tail."

Louise Gale sipped her iced vermouth and shook her head. " The bag of bones was all right. It was the reading matter that put me off."

" I can't think why."

" My dear girl, it's elementary. Never bother with men under thirty who read *The Financial Times*. They only do it to impress other people, which is suspicious ; or to impress themselves, which is childish."

" Don't be so midewed. Perhaps somebody's left him a vast fortune and he's wondering how to invest it."

" Then I'll wait until he's wondering how to spend it."

Rose wriggled in her chair, throbbing visibly " Well, I think he's supremely toothsome, and I shan't be satisfied until I've found out all about him."

"Let me save you the trouble. Name, Rupert Thorn. Age, twenty-nine. Occupation, local host for the Marco Polo travel agency. Sits in the sun all day, and pounds a typewriter all night. Hobbies: playing the guitar, drinking chianti, and howling operatic arias in his bath in a tremendously powerful tenor voice, raucous and damnably flat."

"How did you find all that out?"

"From the lift-boy, who also let me into the secret of the private sun-lounge amongst the rocks. And if you want to know any more, you can get it for yourself. What you need is less day-dreaming and more free enterprise."

"At least I should never descend to bribing lift-boys."

"Who said anything about bribing? I merely permit him to pinch my back from time to time, as we clank up and down, and he's my slave for life. When you've been secretary to old Rolo for six months, you begin to get a grip on the science of public relations. . . . What's the matter now?"

Rose leaned forward, whispering. "That aristocratic type at the table behind you"

"I know, I noticed her. Remarkably handsome woman. What about her?"

"I'm quite certain she's trying to overhear everything we say."

"Then I hope she's hearing something to her advantage. Perhaps she, too, is a Rupert Thorn addict. . . . And talk of the devil!"

A swarthy young fellow, in black trousers and white dinner-coat, was weaving through the crowd of evening-idlers in the roadway towards the lakeside terrace. From one hand dangled a shooting-stick, from the

other a fiasco of chianti. Wedged under his left arm was a ponderous black book fastened with a brass clasp.

"Oh, the darlings," gasped Rose. "Doesn't he stalk!"

Rupert stepped out to the tiled terrace and surveyed the packed tables under the leafy roof of ilex branches. His sharp, mahogany-tanned features were fixed in a remote scowl. The hum of chatter died away. Within a very few seconds he was the focal point of all eyes.

Having satisfied himself that there was no vacant place, he advanced to the stone balustrade, immediately above the water, and put down his luggage. Then he took a rubber ferrule from his pocket, fitted it over the steel spike of his stick, spread the handles and settled himself at ease. This done, he lit a cigar, took a swig at his wine, and buried himself in his book.

The silence was broken by a warbling giggle from Rose; a giggle which increased to a strangled spluttering and thence to squeals of hysterical laughter.

For quite some time Rupert remained sunk in his book, apparently unaware of the uproar developing behind his back. Then, deliberately, he revolved on his perch and pinned the two girls with a blistering glare.

By now the company on the terrace had sensed the mounting tension. There was much craning of necks, and some of the customers were frankly standing up to get a better view. Nor were they disappointed. Rose and Louise reacted promptly. The former fell off her chair, overturning the table and glasses with a terrible crash. The latter, unmoved by the surrounding chaos, calmly returned her antagonist's fire. Then, leaning

forward with her hands on her knees, she opened her mouth to the fullest extent and slowly poked out her tongue.

Rupert rose to his feet, his stick clattering to the tiles. For several seconds he glowered down at Rose who was now on all-fours in a puddle of vermouth, moaning feebly. Finally he drew himself up and tapped the brass-bound volume clasped against his chest.

"I am keenly reminded of a pithy little passage in the Holy Scriptures where, lo, it is written that the laughter of the fool is as the crackling of thorns under a pot. Ecclesiastes, chapter seven, verse six. I recommend the excerpt to your attention."

He turned to Louise. "And as for you, if you are really so frantic to inspect the wonders of nature, then there is no need to scamper round the rocks like a sex-starved chamois. You have only to apply at room fifty-three, during the usual hours, when I shall be delighted to show you all the principal points of interest. No charge is made, and no preliminary appointment is necessary . . ."

He broke off and gestured towards the road where an open Cadillac convertible, containing a pair of glossy Latins, was edging into the kerb.

" . . . and here, I fancy, are your playmates. I trust you will have an agreeable evening. Permit me to remind you, however, that the pampered sons of Milanese industrialists are unlikely to share my own high moral tone."

As he turned away, a crisp voice came from the shadows in the corner of the terrace.

"Perhaps you would care to join me, Mr. Thorn. There is a spare chair here, and you seem to be having a strenuous evening."

Rupert took the offered seat and found himself facing a lady in a black dinner-gown, a magnificent pearl choker and a fog of chypre. He was at a loss to place her. She had the figure of a young woman, but the elaborately dressed hair framing the highly-bred features was completely white. Moreover, under the heavy cosmetic mask, the marks of time were clearly visible. Was she a prematurely aged forty-five? Or a well-preserved fifty-five? Or a miraculously embalmed seventy-five? Meanwhile, her large, brilliant, sapphire eyes were examining him with candid amusement.

"Do relax, Mr. Thorn, and rid yourself of the Holy Bible. It makes my arms ache to watch you."

"Thank you. And, by the way, you have the advantage of me."

"My name is Cleft. Sophy Cleft."

"Indeed? Do you know, I have a feeling I've heard that name before, though I can't imagine where. It's kind of you to ask me to join you."

"Not at all. I was bored, and I had a notion you would divert me."

"Obliged, I'm sure. Why?"

"For the past fifteen minutes I've been eavesdropping on those two young ladies who have just left. They were discussing you at length and in detail. What I heard impressed me deeply."

"I advise you to ignore them. They're a couple of shameless hussies. I don't know which is the worse. Take Rose Petal, the little redhead, for example. Every time I pass through the hotel lounge, there she is, poised on her neck with her legs at twenty-past eight, reading the Kinsey Report."

"Very instructive for both of you"

"And as for Louise Gale, the chestnut one . . . well, really! I thought she was fairly respectable until this morning, and then! . . . well, really!"

"Quite so. I heard all about it. But you must make allowances for feminine curiosity. I may say she struck me as a most attractive girl."

Rupert blinked, swallowed, and hastily beckoned a waiter.

"You would care for a drink, perhaps, Miss . . . er . . . that is . . ."

She held up her beautifully shaped hands, guiltless of rings.

"Yes, 'Miss' is correct. Though not for want of asking, I'd have you know."

"That I can readily believe. Some champagne?"

"Very nice of you, dear boy. But isn't it rather extravagant?"

"Yes, I'm happy to say it is. It will go down on my expenses sheet under 'entertaining.'"

Having downed two glasses of wine in quick time, she produced a massive gold case from her handbag.

"You will join me in a cigar, Rupert? I may call you that, I hope? Such a dashing name, I always think. I once had a very beautiful love affair with a captain in the Blues called Rupert. Unfortunately he was hit over the head with a bottle in The Camel's Hump in Alexandria and passed away in a jiffy."

She pushed across her empty glass, giving him a dazzling smile. "And you must call me Sophy. It helps me to forget my receding gums."

Rupert was fascinated. What was one to make of this white-haired lady who smoked a cigar with incomparable style, and combined the verities of sixty with the sparkle of sixteen? Furthermore, the name

Cleft was nagging away at the back of his mind. He was now quite certain that somewhere, sometimes, he had heard it before.

His reflections were interrupted by Sophy's hand on his arm.

"And now let's talk about you. I understand you're the local host for the Marco Polo travel agency."

"I am."

"Then how is it you are able to spend all day sitting stark naked on a shooting-stick, reading *The Financial Times*?"

"I have an understanding with the hotel chefs about the fish."

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow you."

"Well, as soon as my clients arrive I arrange for their fish to miss the refrigerator. The heat and the flies do the rest. A mild attack of guppy-tummy, and I hear no more of them for the rest of their holiday. Otherwise, of course, they'd be pestering the life out of me, and I'd never get on with my real work."

"And what is that, may I ask?"

"I'm a poet."

"I'm delighted to hear it. Poets and stock-jobbers are my favourite pets. What are you writing at present? A sheaf of gritty little lyrics?"

"Not likely. It's the box-office I'm after. I'm doing a five-act verse-drama with a slap up-to-date background of supersonic aeronautics. You know the sort of thing: chocker with popular science and bogus psychology. I'm calling it *The Jetman's Revenge; or To-morrow's Boomsday*."

"It sounds enchanting."

"Oh, it is, I assure you. A gorgeous welter of blood and lust in the early seventeenth-century manner."

That's why I'm reading the Bible, to pump some wind and thunder into my style."

Sophy drew deeply on her cigar and stared thoughtfully at Rupert who was now waving his arms about windmill-fashion, a lock of black hair tumbling across his brow.

"Do you know, you remind me immensely of a charming man I used to know, many, many years ago. He was in the Diplomatic Service, and destined for a brilliant career until he started sending kippers to all his friends, in the embassy bags. That, alas, was the end of poor Evelyn Chancery . . ."

"Who did you say! Who!"

"Evelyn Chancery. Why?"

"But he's my uncle!"

"Well, what a delightful coincidence."

"Isn't it, just. And now I remember where I've heard your name before. You must be the Sophy Cleft who . . . who . . . well, you must be the Sophy Cleft."

"Correct, my boy. None other."

There was a pause whilst Rupert gazed at his companion in wonder and in awe. Then he inclined towards her.

"Tell me, are all those stories really true? Did you really appear in the Royal Enclosure in a pair of coconut shells and a grass skirt?"

"Certainly. It was a very hot day."

"And did you, in fact, put that iced-pudding in the Archduke's night-cap?"

"Certainly. It was a very hot night."

"And did you really attend a Cabinet meeting, disguised as the Chief of the Imperial General Staff? And turn out at the Boxing-day meet of the Belvoir hounds on a zebra? And get engaged to the First Sea

Lord, and then change your mind because his bed-socks tickled you? And did you really auction your trousseau on the steps of the National Gallery in aid of the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge in Foreign Parts?"

"The one about the First Sea Lord is not strictly accurate."

"No?"

"No. I could tolerate his bed-socks. It was his woolly combs that upset me. . . . How is your Uncle Evelyn, but the way?"

"Well, thank you, apart from the gout."

"He was always a martyr to it. I used to poultice him until the steam spurted out of his nostrils."

"I'm afraid you'd find him rather drab now. Farms his little property up in Elmshire, busies himself in local government, runs the Boy Scouts, and plays the organ in the village church. In fact, except for some rather curious rumours about the goings-on at the ladies' choir-practices, you'd never suspect what a tearaway he used to be."

Sophy chuckled softly. "Too true. When I run through the list of my old playmates I often enjoy a quiet snigger. Directors of this, chairmen of that, heads of departments, chiefs of the services, governors, judges, even bishops. There's no end to it. Though I admit I was a little surprised when I saw in *The Times* the other day that Minnie Blazer had been appointed headmistress of St. Goneril's, probably the smartest girls finishing-school in the country. And I suffered an even sharper jolt when I saw whom they'd appointed to this new industrial ministry. The last time I met Rolo Gander was on the doorstep of a curious little establishment in the Paral·lel in Barcelona.

I was going in as he was coming out . . . a**f**borne and in his socks."

Sophy sighed profoundly. "Dear me, talking over old times like this makes me quite maudlin. But I mustn't grumble. I've got more to look back on than most people . . . even if I do have to look at most of it through smoked-glasses instead of rose-coloured spectacles."

"You certainly have," agreed Rupert. "You ought to write your autobiography. On asbestos, of course."

"I've often thought of it. But, alas, I have no abilities in that direction. My talents have always lain between the sheets, not on them."

"Then why not let me do it for you?"

"But, my dear boy, you've got your own work."

"I'm prepared to shelve that. I've a notion there's a great deal more money in your life-story than in *The Jetman's Revenge*. You supply the material, I'll do the writing, and we'll split the profits fifty-fifty. What do you say?"

For a full ten seconds Sophy stared across the table, searching Rupert with those glittering, sapphire eyes. Then she ground out the butt of her cigar and nodded briefly.

"I think it's an excellent idea. When do we begin?"

"As soon as you like. How long are you staying here . . .?"

Rupert's voice faded out as he caught sight of two figures tottering towards the terrace. Their faces were blanched, their lips indrawn. Clearly it was all they could do to set one foot before the other.

"Damnation! I shall have to leave you. Two of my customers still war**a** and mobile. They'll be

making a nuisance of themselves unless I take instant action."

"What a bore. When will you be at liberty again?"

"To-morrow morning at eleven o'clock, I promise you. And now, I'll go and route out the chef, tell him precisely what I think of him, and get those two zombies back to bed for the duration. It's always the same these days. You can't depend on anyone to carry out your instructions."

## 2

AROUND two a.m. there was brisk activity on the upper floors of the Hotel Excelsior.

In room eighty-one, Rose Petal, fresh from her bath, was squirting herself all over with *Sueur d'Extase*. This done, she touched up her lips, brushed her hair into a copper halo and put on a jade-green wrapper. Then she went on to the balcony and scrutinised the gnarled wistaria branches that coiled along the face of the building.

In room ninety-five, Louise Gale, fresh from her bath, was squirting herself all over with *Frénésie d'Amour*. This done, she touched up her lips, combed her hair into a chestnut cascade and put on a crocus-yellow wrapper. Then she went on to the balcony and scrutinised the cluster of drainpipes that ran down the side of the building.

In room fifty-three, Rupert Thorpe, in peacock-blue silk pyjamas, was reared up in bed against a mound of pillows, a cumbersome writing-board balanced on his knees. He was wearing massive horn-rimmed spectacles and an evil-smelling Sherlock Holmes pipe dangled from his jaws. The night-table was loaded with tobacco tins, tea-things, and a spirit stove with a kettle on it. Sheaves of typescript littered the bed. Grunting irritably in an inferno of smoke and sparks, he was correcting the final draft of *The Jetman's Revenge*.

At two-fifteen he was disturbed by noises outside his open windows. As he put down his pen and looked up, a long bare leg emerged from the darkness, waved

about frantically for a while, and then reached in over the balcony railing. A moment later Rose Petal was standing in the window-space, smiling winsomely.

"Well, I finally made it."

"So it seems. Are you practising the Indian rope-trick? Or did you come by space-ship?"

"I came via the wistaria tree, and ripped myself to tatters *en route*. Look!"

She parted the skirts of her wrapper, exposing a pearly thigh marred by a scarlet graze. Simultaneously the kettle boiled over.

Rupert picked up his pen and nodded towards the table. "Perhaps you'd be good enough to make the tea. I'm extremely busy."

With this he took off his spectacles and plunged once more into his mass of typescript.

Rose was nonplussed. She had expected her dramatic entry to provoke equally dramatic reactions: amazement, even alarm, followed by delicate negotiations culminating in an entente cordiale. Instead, she felt like a junior housemaid reporting late for work. For some moments she hesitated on the threshold, her lips agape. Then she crossed to the table and set about brewing the tea, darting bewildered glances meanwhile at the muttering figure on the bed.

When all was ready she thrust forward a cup. "Here you are. That is if you can spare the time to drink it."

Rupert took the brew and inspected it critically. "Thank you. Actually, I like it a good deal dirtier than this. However, it will have to do."

Rose put her hands on her hips and stamped viciously. "Well! I'll be everlastingly damned. I risk my neck and rasp myself to the bone to come and

visit you, and all you do is clap me on cookhouse fatigues, and grumble about the colour of your tea. Aren't you pleased to see me?"

Rupert swallowed his drink in two gulps and put aside his cup. "That depends. Can you read and write?"

"I can endorse a cheque and stumble through the comic strips."

"Then I *am* glad to see you. I'm correcting the script of my latest composition, a verse-drama in five acts. It is imperative that I finish the job to-night, because to-morrow I'm embarking on a new enterprise that will tax my energies to the limit."

He picked up a bundle of paper and thrust it into Rose's hand. "If you will be kind enough to check through Act Two, I shall be much obliged. Look out for spelling errors, and keep a close watch on the punctuation. Take your time over it. Accuracy, rather than speed, is the prime consideration."

Presently he glanced up again. Rose was rocking gently on her heels, her eyes glazed.

"Come, my girl, what are you waiting for? There's a long night's toil ahead of us. . . . Oh, I see. You need somewhere to work, of course. I think it will be simplest if you join me in bed. Then you can help me to balance this tiresome board, and I can keep an eye on what you're doing. 'Come along! Time flies!'"

Like one hypnotised, Rose climbed in under the single sheet and wedged her knees beneath the improvised writing-desk. At the same time Rupert screwed up his eyes and vented a bitter hiss.

"Dear Heaven! That green wrapper beside my pyjamas! It shrieks! It's murder. You'll have to get rid of it. I'm terribly sensitive to that sort of thing."

Rosie immediately perked up. This was much more the sort of thing she had been expecting. She fluttered her eyelids and forced up a blush.

"Of course I'll take it off if you insist. But I think I ought to warn you that I'm starko underneath."

"You are? Sensible girl! Physical freedom is the first essential of mental discipline. As my dear old housemaster used to say: tight pants, loose thinking. . . . *That's* the idea. Just throw it on the floor. And now to work. If there's anything in the text that you don't understand, refer to me."

At this point the door to the adjoining sitting-room opened, revealing Louise Gale.

Rupert bowed from the loins. "What a pleasant surprise! Do come in. How did *you* arrive? By wistaria also?"

"No, by draughting; sustaining six slipped discs and a wealth of saddle-sores."

She leaned against the doorpost and inspected the panorama on the bed. "It seems, however, that I bring coals to Newcastle. Two's company, three's none, as they say. Likewise, too many cooks spoil the broth."

"On the contrary. Many hands make light work. Your assistance will be invaluable. We're busy checking over the script of my poetical drama in five acts. You're just in time to start on Act Three. . . . Though perhaps you wouldn't mind filling up the kettle first. Hurry now! Much remains to be done."

Louise opened her lips as if to speak. Then, without a word, she took the kettle to the bathroom, refilled it and put it on the spirit-stove.

Rupert nodded approvingly. "Excellent! And now, if you will get in on this side, we can press on with the task that lies before us. There's plenty of

room. I always insist upon a double-bed, thereby getting twice the sleep in half the time."

Louise had scarcely got one foot in when she was arrested by an agonised moan.

"That wrapper! For pity's sake get rid of it. The orange in the yellow just ~~urde~~ <sup>urds</sup> my peacock-blue. I'm madly sensitive to that sort of thing."

"By all means, if you insist . . ."

"I ~~do~~ insist. Crocus yellow always makes me feel ever so poorly. Let me help you. . . . Ah! I see you, too, are a thoroughly sensible girl. *That's* the idea. Just throw it on the floor."

"Anything else you'd like me to do?"

"Yes. Pass me my spectacles, will you? They're on the table beside you."

Louise picked them up and blinked. "But there aren't any lenses in them."

"Of course not."

"But why?"

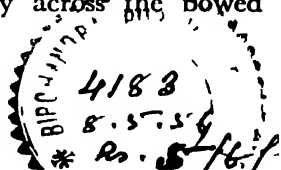
"Because I have perfect vision and exceptionally long eyelashes."

"Then why do you wear them?"

"To lend maturity to my thoughts. Poetry calls for a well-ripened mind. Before starting on my next opus I shall have all my teeth out and fit myself with clackers."

He lifted the sheet and patted the mattress. "Now you get. We can't spend all night gossiping. We have many hours of steady work before us. You may smoke, but kindly refrain from talking. This job calls for the utmost concentration."

By four a.m. Rose and Louise had finished their work, and were conversing freely across the bowed



shoulders of their bedmate who was still ~~deep~~ in Act Five.

"And to think that it was for this we broke up the party and came home early. A wicked waste of the last night of our holiday."

"I don't altogether agree. There's a fantastic touch about the whole thing that rather pleases me."

"Fantastic? If you ask me, it's positively unwholesome. A vigorous male of twenty-nine in bed with two bare women, and all he does is natter about commas and semi-colons and the glorious traditions of the English verse-drama."

"I can tolerate the culture. What I *do* find rather insufferable is this appalling briskness. To work, to work! Much remains to be done! Let us press on with the task that lies before us! When he rapped me over the knuckles with that filthy pipe and told me to take Time by the Forelock, I all but crowned him with the teapot."

Rose threw herself back against the pillows and glowered at the nape of Rupert's neck. "Just look at him. He's completely forgotten our existence. It's incredible. Unless, of course, he's a tulip."

"I'm pretty certain he's not that. No tulip ever penned stuff like this. Judging by Act Three, I'd say *The Jetman's Revenge* was the work of a highly educated bull."

"Well, I've had enough of the whole silly nonsense. Don't forget, we have to be on the boat by ten o'clock, and we haven't even started our packing. I'm going back to my own bed for a few hours' sleep. Are you coming?"

"No. Having got so far, I'm going to see this thing through to the end. He's on the last few pages now,

and I'm interested to see what happens when he's finished."

"Am I to understand that you still nourish hopes?"

"Well, you never can tell. After all, he's still breathing, and he feels quite warm. But don't let me detain you against your will."

Rose settled still deeper into the mattress. "If you think I'm going to leave you alone with him you're much mistaken. I can't imagine why you had to butt in anyway; especially after being so haughty about him earlier on. If I'd had him to myself I might have managed to kindle his tinder."

"You forget that I had a pressing invitation to inspect the wonders of nature, free of charge and without previous appointment. . . . And just in case, we'd better draw lots for first service. We must be ready to strike whilst the Iron is Hot. . . . Damnation! Now he's got me started on his wretched cracker-mottoes."

Louise picked two spent matchsticks off the sheet and held out her hand. "You choose. The short one wins. . . ."

She recoiled as Rupert suddenly slammed down his pen and jerked erect.

"And that's that. The culminating moment of twelve months' intellectual travail and spiritual agony. Thorn's masterpiece is complete. Let Fry and Eliot tremble."

Placing his left hand on the pile of typescript, he gestured widely with his right. "I see it, all. First, a success of esteem at the Edinburgh festival. Then a nice little run in New York. And finally, if there ever happens to be a London theatre available to a British author, a smash-hit in the West End."

He put his arms around his colleagues' waists. "I am most grateful for your assistance. To you, no doubt, it seems a trifling matter. But in years to come you will look back on this night and realise its true significance. When your grandchildren are studying *The Jetman's Revenge* as a set-book for their General Certificate of Education, you will gather them around your creaking knees and, numbling through toothless gums, you will tell them how you were privileged to assist at the re-birth of English poetic tragedy."

He slid the completed work into a cardboard folder and put it on the night-table. Then he tossed the writing-board to the floor, and stretched luxuriously.

"And now for some well-earned relaxation. Even poets are creatures of flesh and blood. Like other men, they are subject to the normal instincts which must be satisfied in due season. I propose to satisfy mine forthwith."

Thereupon he lay down flat on his back, folded his arms on his chest and, within five seconds, was sound asleep.

Rose paused in the doorway, tying the girdle of her wrapper with a vicious tug. "I've never been so insulted in all my life. I'm not a conceited girl, but I do happen to know that I'm not exactly repulsive. In the course of my eighteen years, I've set fire to a fair assortment, ranging from a bricklayer's apprentice of fifteen to a High Court Judge of seventy-five. Yet that refrigerated Shakespeare, there, treats me as if I had hooves and tusks and a dense black pelt. If Minnie Blazer gets to hear of this she'll expel me on the spot."

Louise leaned over the bed and settled the pillows more comfortably under Rupert's head. She drew the sheet up to his chin and, with a delicate forefinger,

swept back the long black lock that tumbled across the poet's brow.

"I see your point of view, but I still think he's rather sweet. What's more, I predict a brilliant future for him."

"Indeed? I haven't seen much sign of it to-night."

"When you've had more experience of life you'll understand. The key to success is concentration of purpose. Brains and luck and influence are a help, but what gets you home is a fanatical concentration on the end in view. And our Rupert has certainly got that." She crushed out her cigarette and picked up her wrapper. "I'm not a conceited girl, either. But there's one thing I do know: the man who shares his bed with me and still gets on with his work is going a long, long way . . ."

She was interrupted by a rasping snore, followed by a quavering whistle. At the same time the sleeper raised a hand and settled his empty spectacles more firmly on his nose.

"You see what I mean," said Louise. "Concentration of purpose. Even when unconscious."

### 3

SIR ROLAND GANDER was a master of the art of self-production.

At a very early age he had noticed that the man who gets ahead is the man who keeps himself in the picture. He had also noticed the British affection for mild eccentricity. Accordingly, from his school-days onwards, he had cultivated odd little quirks of behaviour that singled him out from the ruck.

These eccentricities were always shrewdly calculated : colourful enough to catch the eye but never too disturbing. Above all, he was careful to restrict his pranks to the surface. In his views and opinions he was solidly conventional. For he was well aware that the Englishman's delight in an original hat is only equalled by his horror of an original thought.

This policy had never failed him. At school he was appointed Captain of the Cricket XI, chiefly because it was impossible to overlook the man who always batted in a monocle and spats. At the university he was elected President of the Union because it was impossible to ignore the man who always rose to speak in a Roman toga and sandals. His meteoric career in Associated Motors was largely due to his hobby of playing Hungarian gipsy music on a portable harmonium ; a habit which made him a welcome guest at Directors' luncheons. Finally, on entering politics, he had won a tough constituency by conducting his campaign in a coach-and-four ; and he speedily gained the respectful attention of the Commons by taking his seat wearing a deerstalker hat and spurs.

His opportunity came with an outbreak of strikes and industrial disputes. Organising a squad of lively backbenchers, he pressed for an entirely new approach to the problem. The existing machinery, he declared, was out of date and useless. The upshot was the formation of a special Ministry to deal with these troubles, and the appointment of the Minister was a foregone conclusion.

His flair for publicity was brilliantly demonstrated when a name was being sought for the new Ministry. He would have nothing to do with such hackneyed terms as Conciliation, Arbitration, Pacification. These were out of date and useless. It was his intention to bring an entirely new spirit to bear on industrial frictions. There must be an atmosphere of mutual confidence, brotherhood and teamwork. His organisation would be called the Ministry of Harmonious Relations.

This fanciful title was thought at first to be a blunder. But not for long. Some discreet gossip about the Minister's skill on the portable harmonium instantly turned the trick. Within a week the political cartoonists of the popular press were featuring him seated at his instrument (in deerstalker and spurs) soothing the savage breasts of directors and shop stewards with Hungarian gipsy music. Shortly thereafter *The Times* had a fourth leader on the Harmonious Minister, and Sir Roland Gander's political future was assured.

This July morning he was in thoughtful mood as he paced the study in his luxurious bachelor flat in Chestnut Square. There was a full day ahead. First, a private talk with Tom Brown, Chairman of Domestic Electronics, about a threatened strike. Then another fraternal chat, on the same subject, with Piers Gaveston,

Secretary of the Fissionworkers' Union. In addition there was the drafting of his new scheme for a permanent Board of Unions and Managements.

But he was not concerned at the moment with politics. He was thinking of a more personal matter. To-day was his sixtieth birthday. He found the fact slightly depressing. Of course he didn't look his age or anything like it. All his own teeth; hair as thick as ever and scarcely touched with grey; stomach as flat as a board, thanks to squash and fencing. But still, sixty was sixty. Another ten years and he would have reached the allotted span.

He squared his shoulders and poured himself a stiff whisky. This would never do. He was getting quite maudlin. He needed something to take his mind off the subject. Fortunately there was something readily available to take his mind off this and any other subject. He pressed the bell under his massive mahogany desk. A few seconds later Louise Gale appeared, poised and cool in a formal white silk shirt and a dark grey flannel skirt. She was carrying a sheaf of white roses.

"Good morning, Louise."

"Good morning, Sir Roland. Many happy returns of the day. I hope you'll like these flowers."

"My dear girl, how very, very charming of you. But how did you know?"

"I looked in your passport."

"What little detective you are."

"One should always know the essential facts about one's employer."

"Such as the fact that he's got one foot in the grave and is rapidly sinking into senility?"

He flashed her his brilliant, boyish smile, and buttoned the full-skirted tweed jacket that set off his

magnificent shoulders and slender waist. He was quite put out when she ignored the opening and pointed to the flowers.

"Shall I put these in water?"

"Please do. They're beautiful. I should like them here on the desk, right beside me."

His depression vanished as he watched her moving about the room. What a splendid young creature she was. So well-bred and detached, and yet so . . . so . . . sexy. Those luscious haunches rotating under the tight skirt. That discreet, expensive scent touched up with a whiff of hot skin. He swallowed abruptly on a dry throat. Was she, he wondered for the thousandth time, virtuous? One could never tell. These remote ones were often the hottest little . . .

He pulled himself together, as Louise put the bowl of roses on his desk.

"Thank you. A very sweet gesture. I'm most touched. And may I return the compliment and say how very nice you look in that new outfit?"

"I'm glad you like it."

"I do indeed. That blouse affair. So fresh and . . . and virginal. You don't mind my using that word, I hope?"

"What word?"

"Er . . . virginal."

"Not at all. It has a rather delightful antique ring about it."

Sir Roland winced and hurriedly opened the folder on his desk.

"Well, we'd better get on. We'll tackle this pet scheme of mine again. You can take it straight on to the machine. Just a rough outline."

He took post in the bay window and 'started to dictate.

"After mature reflection I am of the fixed opinion that the existing machinery is out of date and useless. What is needed is an entirely fresh approach, motivated by a spirit of fraternal goodwill and mutual confidence. To this end I advocate the setting up of a permanent consultative body representative of both sides of Industry. What I envisage is a Board of Unions and Managements where day-to-day problems can be threshed out by man-to-man contact in an atmosphere of reciprocal goodwill and common understanding."

Tim cleared his throat, grasped his lapels, and proceeded.

"The essence of the B.U.M. is speed in action. Unimpeded by red-tape and paper . . ."

He broke off. "What did you say, Louise?"

"I didn't speak."

"I thought you did. Very well, then, we'll go on. Where was I?"

"Speed in action, unimpeded by red-tape and . . . er . . . paper."

"Ah, yes. Now let me see . . ."

Turning from the window, his glance fell upon Louise who was leaning back in her chair, waiting for him to resume, her hands linked behind her head.

It was too much. His pulse staggered and he gasped audibly. A moment later he was standing behind her chair. He bent over as if to read the page of script in the machine.

"Excuse me. . . I'd just like to see what we've got so far. . . H'm. Yes. Quite so. Now . . ."

A gust of *Frénésie d'Amour* and freshly sprung sweat assaulted his nostrils. The script blurred before his

eyes. He shuddered like one racked by an ague. Then his right hand, as if drawn by a magnet, rose, slid forward and closed over the inflated silk.

At the same instant there was a thump on the study door which burst open to admit the seedy figure of millionaire Tom Brown.

"'Ullo, Rolo, me old cock! I'm in the 'ell of an 'urry, so I come straight up without botherin' the servants. . . . Ho! Pardon me! I trust I don't intrewd."

Sir Roland, blushing deep puce, had sprung back against the desk. With a supreme effort, he turned on his notorious smile.

"Come in, To'm. Delighted to see you. Of course you don't intrude. I was just filling in time until you arrived; getting in some work on a pet scheme of mine."

"So I noticed," replied Tom Brown, grinning coarsely. "And a very nice little scheme it is, too, if you'll allow me to say so."

Sir Roland looked at him with revulsion. What a disgusting little tyke the fellow was. Scruffy, undersized, pecking of cheap tobacco, and dressed in a loathsome reach-me-down suit that was frayed at the cuffs and covered with food stains. He dismissed Louise with a curt nod and pulled up a chair for his visitor who finally sat down with an appreciative wheeeew when the door had closed.

"My word, Rolo, you don't 'arf know 'ow to pick 'em. As nice a little bit of 'ome-work as ever I see. No wonder you like to do most of yer work 'ere instead of at the Ministry."

Sir Roland covered his anger and disgust with yet another brilliant smile and leaned across the desk.

"Well, now, Tom. What's all this trouble at Domestic Electronics? Let's hear all about it. You can speak quite freely to me, you know, and in absolute confidence."

Tom Brown refused the offered cigar and lit instead a ragged cigarette-nub from the store of butts which he always carried loose in his trousers' pocket. Then he did speak, and with freedom.

The facts were simple. His employees (a pack of idle, ungrateful, bolshevik bastards) had declared themselves unsatisfied with Music While You Work. Steam-radio, in these enlightened days, was a bloody insult. What they demanded was the installation of a television set alongside every machine in the factory. And smartish. Or else.

"And we can't afford no strike just now," concluded Tom Brown. "Not with the Commitector just comin' into production an' the Yanks yellin' their 'eads off fer the stuff."

"The Commitector, Tom? What's that? Some new anti-submarine device?"

"Not likely. It's a new gimmick me boffins 'as been workin' on fer years. It's fer detectin' Communists. Works like a lie-detector, only simpler. Yer connect it up to the chap yer think's a Commy, an' if 'e is there's a sort o' T.V. screen what lights up bright red. We've got a ten million dollar order from the U.S. fer it."

In due course, Sir Roland sat back and folded his arms.

"Well, Tom, as I see it, the brutes haven't got a leg to stand on. When I see Gaveston I shall take a very strong line. Between ourselves, my sympathies are all with Management these days. There's no doubt

the workers are idle, irresponsible and riddled with Communism. You can rest assured that I shall bring the heaviest pressure to bear on the Fissionworkers' Union to have this damnable nonsense nipped in the bud. If you ask me, Tom, what we need to set Industry on its feet is a nice little pool of a million unemployed."

A few minutes after Tom Brown had left, Louise showed in Piers Gaveston, Secretary of the Fissionworkers' Union.

Sir Roland looked at him with admiration. Tall, slim, beautifully groomed, he reeked of Winchester and New College, and wore a perfect bespoke suit.

"Good morning, Piers. Delighted to see you. Try my cigars and sherry, if they're up to your standard."

"Many thanks, old boy. If they're up to the standard of your secretary they'll suit me well enough. A charming creature. No wonder you do so much of your work at home."

Piers crossed his elegant legs and adjusted his Sulka tie.

"Well, you wanted to see me?"

"Yes. About this threatened strike at Domestic Electronics. I've just seen Brown. I gather he's being unreasonable about installing television in the machine-shops. Obstinate little ass."

"So he told you that was the trouble, did he?"

"Well, isn't it?"

"Of course not. The facts are perfectly simple. It's just that my people object to working for a communist management."

"What!"

"And let me tell you they've got a cast-iron case. You know this Committee thing they're making? Well, the other day, when Tom was snoozing off a

hangover in the office, two of the lads nipped him and connected him up. The screen went blinding crimson, and the whole contraption fused. Naturally my chaps aren't standing for that sort of thing."

In due course Sir Roland sat back and folded his arms.

"Well, Piers, as I see it, the Management hasn't got a leg to stand on. Between ourselves, my sympathies are all with the workers these days. There's no doubt the Managements are grasping, callous and riddled with Communism. You can rest assured that I shall bring the heaviest pressure to bear on Domestic Electronics to have this scandalous state of affairs nipped in the bud. If you ask me, Piers, what we need to set Industry on its feet is a thumping good general strike."

At mid-day Sir Roland was once more alone. His skilful handling of Tom Brown and Piers Gaveston had restored his confidence and raised his spirits. His thoughts turned again to Louise. The situation was ridiculous. Here he was, a successful man of the world, behaving like a blundering schoolboy. It was high time he pulled himself together and put a stop to the nonsense. He pressed the bell decisively.

When she came in he was perched on the corner of his desk in an attitude of youthful nonchalance.

"As to-day is my birthday, Louise, I think a little celebration is in order. I should be delighted if you would do me the honour of having luncheon with me."

"That's very nice of you. But I'm terrible sorry, I'm lunching with Mr. Brown at the Ritz."

"Indeed! Then what about dinner this evening?"

"I'm terribly sorry, I'm dining with Mr. Gaveston at Claridge's."

There was a taut pause. For a moment Louise was maliciously amused by the effect of her replies. The total deflation of Sir Roland Gander was a noteworthy spectacle. But then her amusement gave place to regret. Really, it was too bad. He looked just like a little boy whose visit to the pantomime has been cancelled at the last minute. Her maternal instincts burst into blossom. She sat down at her typewriter and gave him a smile that liquefied his spine.

"But I tell you what we *could* do."

"Er . . . yes?"

"We could go on with our work. Exactly where we left off."

At five o'clock Louise was sitting on the edge of the bed, dreamily pulling on her stockings. There was a knock on the dressing-room door, followed by Sir Roland's voice now two tones deeper and fruitier than usual.

"May I come in?"

Wrapped in a Chinese gown of quilted saffron silk, he sat down at his dressing-table and attacked his hair with a pair of gold-backed brushes. Meanwhile he watched in the looking-glass, with tender appreciation, the languid movements of his playmate.

"A penny for them."

"M'm?"

"I said a penny for your thoughts. I hope you're not regretting your luncheon date with Tom Brown."

She slowly emerged from her trance of physical contentment and focused on the Minister of Harmonious Relations who was now spraying his gleaming hair with French Fern. The old boy was a proper corker and no mistake about it. Pompous he might be, and a two-faced careerist; but he was a gentle-

man . . . and a man. She gave him a smile of frankest gratitude and pleasure.

"I regret nothing, I assure you. I was just thinking of the last time I broke up a party for . . . well . . . health reasons."

Sir Roland lowered his scent-spray and revolved on his Italian stool. "Come, now, Louise. That's unkind. You make me jealous."

She stood up and reached for this and that. "Jealous? You've no cause to be. Unless, of course, you're madly interested in English poetical drama and the precise function of the semi-colon. The cat!"

A little later they were sitting in the drawing-room sipping China tea and nibbling cinnamon toast to the accompaniment of Beethoven's A Minor Quartet. Louise, who did not share Sir Roland's rarefied musical tastes, was inspecting the numerous silver-framed photographs strewn about the furniture. Presently her glance fell upon the picture of a lady in riding habit, mounted side-saddle upon what seemed unmistakably to be a zebra.

"I say, who's that? The one on the striped moke, on the chimney-piece there."

Sir Roland regretfully switched off the record-player. After the paradise of the flesh he needed the paradise of the spirit.

"A very old friend of mine. Sophy Cleft. Why the excitement?"

"Because I'm pretty certain I saw her when I was at Bellagio last month."

"You must be mistaken. Sophy has been out of circulation for twenty years and more. In fact, I very much question whether she's still alive. Oddly enough, I was discussing her with Professor Mandrake and the

Bishop of Elmbury at the Athenæum only last week. Neither had heard anything of her since she went to Borneo in '33."

He took down the photograph and smiled reminiscently. "The inimitable, the one and only Sophy. Extraordinary how you ~~rose~~ touch with people." For years on end you meet them everywhere, morning, noon and night. Then other interests intervene: career, politics and so forth. And so you drift apart. A great pity, really. And yet, perhaps, it's just as well." He replaced the picture with a roguish twinkle. "Some of the old acquaintances might well prove a little embarrassing."

"You knew her well?"

"Very well indeed. Dear Sophy! She taught me so much. I owe her more than I can say."

Louise raised her hand in salute towards the chimney-piece. "And so do I."

## 4

ST. GONERIL'S was a monstrous red-brick mansion in the glossiest part of Surrey. Built in 1900 by a prosperous receiver of stolen property, it had been owned successively by an international forger, a bigamous fire-raiser, a crooked race-horse trainer, a practitioner of black magic, three fraudulent company promoters and a television comic.

In 1950 it was bought by a syndicate consisting of a fashion designer, a hair-dresser, a cosmetics manufacturer, a society photographer and a gin distiller. They planned to fill a gap in the British educational system. For career-girls there were the universities. There was no such post-school training centre for society girls. This would be remedied by St. Goneril's. Here the daughters of the very rich would be taught the arts of gracious living and moulded into worthy citizens of the Welfare State. (Fees, a thousand a year, plus extra.)

An impressive Board of Governors was co-opted including Sir Roland Gander, Lord Selvage, Mr. Ambrose Bannister, General Grummit, Dame Agatha Rampant and the Bishop of Elmbury (Chairman). Directress of Studies, Miss Lilian Bezel-Weasel.

In spite of a sizzling publicity campaign, St. Goneril's started badly. After two years there were still many vacancies, and the Founders decided that something drastic must be done. They sought the advice of Tom Brown, Chairman of Domestic Electronics.

His diagnosis was pithy. What St. Goneril's needed

was a New Angle. At present there was nothing to distinguish it from an ordinary finishing-school. A New Angle, that's what it needed ; and sharpish, too, judging by the look of the balance sheet. As an example he cited the electric egg-whisk which his firm had just launched with such enormous success. Simply by fitting it with a miniature carillon that played *D'Ye Ken John Peel*, they had swept the market. The same principle must be applied to St. Goneril's. And the first step, clearly, was to get a new boss. Someone with guts and drive and a packet of New Angles.

A score of candidates were interviewed by the Governors, without success. Finally the Bishop of Elmbury supplied the answer. "If only," he said, "we could get hold of old Minnie Blazer. She'd be just the girl to put the Sunday clothes on St. Goneril's."

His suggestion was adopted and global enquiries instantly begun. At last Minnie was discovered in Buenos Aires where she was directing another, and highly successful, institution for young ladies. She agreed to take on St. Goneril's at a starting salary of two thousand, rising, by annual increments of two-fifty, to three thousand, free of tax, insurance and superannuation.

At the end of a year the Founders and Governors decided she was well worth it. Every place was filled, there was a huge waiting list, and eager parents were entering their young at minus eight months.

This July afternoon Minnie was lying on the sofa in her drawing-room awaiting the arrival of a new customer. She was a fine stamp of woman : florid and bulky, but kept within reasonable bounds by active habits and brilliant corsetting. At sixty-five her hair was still a genuine auburn, her teeth her own, the

whites of her eyes unveined, her command of blasphemy unimpaired.

She had had a busy morning! First a bitter slanging-match on the telephone with the Bishop of Elmbury who declared that he was not getting a fair rake-off on the laundry contract. Then a long haggle with the Scottish poaching gang that supplied St. Goneril's with fresh salmon. Finally, just before luncheon, Virginia Waters had dropped into the office to say that she was going to have a baby; by whom she couldn't just remember at the moment, but no doubt it would come back to her when she had time to riddle through her engagement-book.

At three-thirty Mrs. Pestle was shown in. A single glance sufficed to dissect and classify her: very rich, very common, and probably very tiresome. Minnie promptly seized the initiative by giving her victim a stupefying cocktail and immobilising her in a deep armchair facing the light.

"Well, now, Mrs. Pestle, I understand that you wish to send your daughter to St. Goneril's."

"I'm thinking of it. That is, if the place seems satisfactory. I haven't decided anything yet."

Minnie's jaw stiffened and her fingers locked on her glass. "I see. You haven't decided anything yet. I'm much relieved to hear it."

"Oh! Why?"

"Because we're full up and have a long waiting list."

A tough little smile flickered in Minnie's eyes as she settled herself comfortably into the sofa. She was standing no nonsense from a vulgar creature like this.

"But Sir Roland Gander told me . . ."

"Ah, Sir Roland! A charming man, but, between ourselves, just a little bit irresponsible. Oh, yes, I

know his on the Board of Governors, but that doesn't alter the facts."

"Then there really isn't any vacancy at all?"

"Not at present. However, a vacancy does sometimes occur unexpectedly. For instance, a girl may leave before the end of the course."

"Is that likely to happen in the near future?"

"I haven't heard of it. But one never knows . . ."

Minnie finished her drink and gazed musingly out of the window. "As Directress of Studies at St. Goneril's, I have, of course, absolute authority in all matters of discipline. I have never yet found it necessary to expel a girl, but one never knows . . ."

Mrs. Pestle had spent much of her life behind the fish-and-chip counters from which her husband derived his fortune. She was a realist.

"How much is it going to cost me?"

"Five hundred pounds."

"Five hundred! On top of the fees! That's a bit steep, isn't it?"

"Is it? I'm very fond of my girls, you know. I should hate to lose one."

"All right. Five hundred it is! You'll take a cheque?"

Minnie winced and stared reproachfully at Mrs. Pestle who nodded briefly and replaced her cheque-book in her hand-bag.

"All right. Cash. I'll let you have it before the week-end. When can Cynthia come to you?"

"As soon as you like, Mrs. Pestle. One of my pupils will be leaving to-morrow."

A little later Minnie was holding forth across the tea table. "Since the war there's been a lot of silly nonsense going on in this branch of education. You

know the sort of thing. The rich girl can no longer expect a life of idleness and pleasure. She must train for a useful career and fit herself for the daily grind of practical housekeeping. And so on and so forth. She is taught secretarial work, dressmaking, cookery, nursing, and all the rest. No doubt it reads well in the popular press, but we all know that it's all twaddle. Even in these days a girl can still enjoy a decent life if she's got enough money. And she wouldn't be at St. Goneril's if she hadn't got more than enough."

Minnie refilled the cups and stuffed a handful of cucumber sandwiches into her mouth.

"At St. Goneril's we waste no time on that sort of bunkum. We assume that our girls are destined for two things: a creditable marriage and a life of pleasure. We train them accordingly."

Mrs. Pestle leaned forward eagerly. "I do so agree with you that a good marriage is most important. I understand from Sir Roland that you arrange for the girls to meet suitable young men."

"We do indeed."

"Guards officers, I suppose, and . . ."

Minnie recoiled. "The Guards! My dear Mrs. Pestle, they're completely out of fashion. Full of the most extraordinary people nowadays. At St. Goneril's we stick to the Gunners. Only the crack regiments, of course: the Royal Horse Artillery and the Venerable Company of Bombardiers. I always say you can't beat a nice type of Gunner. There you get everything: breeding, brains, style and reliability."

"Well, I suppose you know best. But it seems rather unusual."

"Certainly it's unusual, Mrs. Pestle. The old methods, as Sir Roland Gander so often asserts, are

out of date and useless. At St. Goneril's we're all for the New Angle. And now, perhaps, you'd like to look over the school. Classes will be going on until half-past four, so you'll have an opportunity to see the girls at work. We'll visit the dog-handling class first, I think."

They went out through the french windows and walked around to the front door. At the foot of the steps a group of students were clustered about a handsome young woman who was lecturing them in crisp clipped accents.

"In the country you must never be seen without a dog, even if you hate the brutes like poison. And it's no use just cluttering yourself up with the things regardless. You must learn to look really dog-ridden, especially when being photographed for the illustrated weeklies. Each occasion needs its own particular treatment. This afternoon we'll practise Country-Houseparty-Hostess-Greeting-Guests. Now, Rachel, get up there and show us what you can do."

A charming brunette emerged from the group and ascended to the top step. She had a dachshund under each arm and a red setter at heel. She wore substantial shoes, a tweed skirt and a woollen sweater and cardigan. The class watched her keenly as she juggled the dachshunds against her bosom and arranged the setter against her right shin. When all was ready, the lecturer delivered judgment.

"Not half bad, Rachel. You've placed the dogs very nicely. But you're not so good yourself. Can't you get a softer grin on your face than that? And for pity's sake get your legs wider apart. I've told you often enough. Straddle and sag! Straddle and sag! Get some gawk into it. *That's* the idea."

As they moved off, Minnie nodded happily. "Capital dog-woman, Sylvia Rattle. You'd never believe it makes her ill to touch the beasts. And now we'll just peep into the morning-room. They should be on Taxi Tactics under Helela Seething. I think you'll be interested."

In the middle of the morning-room a curious tableau was arranged. On a small sofa, a ravishing blonde was seated beside an uncouth lad in workman's overalls. Immediately in front of them another girl was seated on an upright chair with her back to them. Between her hands she held a circular bread-board. Her feet were poised on imaginary pedals and she was giving a lively vocal imitation of a motor engine.

Miss Seething clapped her hands for silence and turned to her class. "Right! There you are. You've got the chap in the back of a cab with you. Now what happens? I'll tell you. Damn all as a rule. It's up to you to *make* things happen. And the way to do that is to take advantage of the corners. Every time the cab swerves, let go all and clamber on top of him. . . . Now, Rebecca, let's see what you can do. You're going to turn out of Curzon Street into Queen Street. As soon as Rosemary swings the wheel over, it's up to you."

The motor noises began again more realistically than ever, punctuated now by shrill hooter blasts. Then the lecturer raised her hand and the driver twirled the bread-board. Simultaneously Rebecca flung herself upon the rustic youth and bit him madly on the car. Deaf to all instructions, she was finally prised off him by brute force.

"That will do, Rebecca! That will do! I said clamber all over him, not tear him apart."

As they closed the door behind them, Mrs. Pestle was looking thoughtful.

"Who was that queer boy in overalls?"

"The gardener's son," replied Minnie. "Half barmy, poor lad. Cracked as a dingo. We've tried others, but we find no sane man can stand the treatment. . . . And now I'd like you to meet Rose Petal, my head girl. We shall find her in her room. Being an advanced pupil, she has the afternoons free for private study."

They went upstairs and Minnie knocked at a door on the first floor. From within there came a heavy thud followed by a faint scurrying sound. Presently Minnie tried the handle. The door was locked. After a second's hesitation she turned away.

"No doubt the child is getting ready for tea. We won't disturb her. You'll have an opportunity of meeting her some other time."

But Mrs. Pestle hung back. "Don't you think we ought to see if anything is wrong? Possibly the girl is ill. That bump just now sounded very much like somebody falling. She may have fainted."

Once more Minnie showed an unwonted hesitation. Then, reluctantly, she raised her hand to knock again. At the same moment the door opened to disclose Rose Petal, flushed and tousled, in her jade-green wrapper.

"Oh, it's you, Miss Blazer. So sorry to keep you waiting. I was just getting dressed."

"That's quite all right, Rose. I won't detain you. I only wanted to introduce you to Mrs. Pestle. Her daughter Cynthia will be joining 'us next week and . . ."

There was a terrible crash as the wardrobe opposite the door pitched forward to the floor, ejecting Captain

Vivian Handspike of the Venerable Company of Bombardiers, in his shirt-tails.

Mrs. Pestle screamed shrilly, and even the imperturbable Minnie gave back a pace. Rose, however, was entirely undisturbed. She raised the Captain from the ruins and drew him forward, smiling coyly.

"Allow me to introduce my husband. I know it's terrible naughty of me not to have told you, Miss Blazer, but Vivian and I were married in London yesterday afternoon. We were going to keep it secret until my birthday next month, because daddy said he wouldn't let me get married until I was nineteen. But you know how it is. We simply couldn't wait. And as Vivian has to go off to a fortnight's firing-camp to-morrow, I just had to see him again before he went."

Minnie drew herself up, more in sorrow than in anger. "Well, really, Rose, I don't know what to say. I do think you might have shown more consideration for your parents and myself. And to invite your husband to the school without my permission is most irregular. . . . However, since you and Captain Handspike have taken the matter into your own hands, I suppose there's nothing more to be done about it."

Then she smiled broadly and pinched Rose on the cheek. "You're a naughty young puss, that's what you are. And I ought to be very, very cross with you. But I'm a sentimental old body, and always was."

She opened her arms impulsively and gathered Rose and the Captain to her bosom. "You're a pair of rascals, and you both deserve a good spanking. Instead, I shall give you my blessing and my warmest wishes for your future happiness. Later on we'll see if we can find a bottle of champagne to celebrate the occasion.

Meanwhile Mrs. Pestle and I will run along and leave you to . . . er . . . your own devices."

Back in the drawing-room, Minnie poured her guest a farewell snorter. "I'm afraid I owe you an apology, Mrs. Pestle. I hope you won't think that we always do things so haphazardly at St. Goneri's. But Rose was always a headstrong child."

Mrs. Pestle brushed the apology aside. "That young man. Is he *the* Vivian Handspike? The heir to the Handspike plastics organisation?"

"Certainly. Not to mention the American fortune on his mother's side."

"And Miss Petal met him here?"

"Why, yes. He came down for our Founder's Day Ball in May. They'd never seen one another before. Quite a whirlwind courtship, as the saying goes."

"When did you say Cynthia could come? Next week?"

"By all means, Mrs. Pestle. She can start on Monday if it suits you."

Mrs. Pestle pulled on her gloves. "I'll have her here by Sunday evening."

A little later Minnie was discussing the situation with Rose. "You put me in an extremely awkward position; though I must admit you handled the thing quite brilliantly. You'll have to make him marry you now, of course. I hope you realise that."

Rose waved a negligent hand. "Don't worry. He'll come up to scratch. You can always rely on the Gunners. I hadn't really intended to get yoked so soon; but it's got to be someone, sometime, I suppose, so it may as well be Vivian. He has the sweetest little toes and always shaves twice a day."

She helped herself to another gin and lit a cigarette.

"The only thing is, we *must* keep this quiet until my birthday. I suppose I can stay on here a few weeks longer?"

"Stay as long as you like, my dear. Until the end of term if you wish. I shall love having you."

At this pressing invitation, Rose looked up sharply. "What's on? Somebody going to get the sack again?"

The ash fell off Minnie's cigarette. "Somebody going to get the sack? I'm sure I don't know what you mean, my dear."

"Then I'll tell you. Mrs. Pestle's daughter is coming here you say. Well, we're full up. So that means somebody has got to go. You've a good chance to get rid of *me* now, but you're not taking it. I ask myself why

"Because you're one of my favourite pupils, Rose, and a very good influence in the school . . ."

"What you mean is Mrs. Pestle's paying you to expel somebody and make room for her brat. And if I leave there'll be a genuine vacancy, and you won't get your blood money. How much is it? Five hundred, as usual?"

"Really, Rose, you have the nastiest mind."

"Don't let's beat about the bush, Miss Blazer. I know exactly what's been going on. I reckon you've made a couple of thousand out of sackings during the past year. Not that I'm blaming you. We all have to live. All I want is my cut."

"You abominable child!"

"You've got five hundred coming to you if I co-operate and stay on at St. Goneril's. If I leave you get nothing. Let's be realistic about it and split the difference."

On her way out, Rose halted abruptly and pointed

to, a silver framed photograph standing on a side-table. It depicted a lady in evening dress standing on one leg in a night-club. In her upraised right hand she grasped a broken bottle. Her disengaged foot was planted on the chest of a recumbent male whose head was covered with a table-napkin.

"I say, who's this?"

Minnie's voice came frostily from the far side of the room. "That is an old acquaintance of mine called Sophy Cleft. The man on the floor was a foreign ambassador with a misplaced sense of humour. At the time that photograph was taken he had just made a remark about the British Monarchy. He never made another."

"Sophy Cleft? Do you know, I'm certain I saw her when I had that week's holiday in Bellagio after my nervous breakdown."

Minnie, who could never remain angry for long, joined Rose in front of the photograph. "You must be mistaken, my dear. Sophy Cleft passed out of circulation at least twenty years ago. In 1933 she took off for Bornco, a short head in front of the bailiffs, and has never been heard of since. Which, perhaps, is just as well."

"Really? Why?"

Minnie held the door open and motioned Rose out.

"Because Sophy Cleft had a great deal in common with yourself . . . and one at a time is more than enough."

## 5

GENERAL ('Splasher') GRUMMIT was the best type of regular officer. That is to say he was brave, intelligent, energetic, well-bred and slightly mad. Moreover, like so many eminent soldiers, he had an unexpected hobby: embroidery. His exquisite work was widely renowned, and he was justly rated the finest needleman in the British Army, if not in the British Isles.

It was during the first part of his career, as a Field Gunner, that he earned his nickname. In his view the basic purpose of a gun was to get rid of ammunition. "If you can't kill the bastards," he would advise his subalterns, "at least you can frighten 'em. So for God's sake splash-it-about-a-bit."

He emerged from the first world war covered with ribbons. But during the inter-war years promotion was slow. Grummit was undismayed. He decided on a long-term policy. Whilst others frantically sought advancement by going on courses, breaking their necks in regimental steeplechases and marrying the Colonel's ugly daughter, he pressed on with his petit-point. Furthermore, he distributed his masterpieces shrewdly. Many a high-ranking officer's wife received a choice fire-screen, counterpane or needle-picture. And his gift of a beautifully worked set of chair covers for the Officers' Mess of the Venerable Company of Bombardiers was greatly esteemed.

On the outbreak of the second world war he reaped his harvest. He was promptly appointed Colonel of the V.C.B. and despatched with that regiment to the

Western Desert. There he splashed it about to such effect that he was speedily given command of an independent armoured brigade, and then a division. Thereafter there was no holding him.

This July afternoon he was enjoying himself hugely. Exercise Cross-stitch, a training-scheme involving thousands of troops and a large part of England, was drawing to a close. After a week of utter confusion, the forces of Redland, under his command, had lured the forces of Blueland into a highly vulnerable position. It only remained to force a gap in his enemy's right-centre, pour his armour through it, and "roll up the whole bloody issue like a ball of string."

The last phase of the conflict was taking place on the vast open spaces of Druid's Plain. Here the Elmsshire Light Infantry were to make the gap, supported by the fire of the Venerable Company of Bombardiers. And, in the interests of realism, live ammunition was being used.

At this critical stage of the battle General Grummit decided to visit his old regiment and encourage them in their task of "blasting the infantryers through the hole."

Captain Vivian Handspike, commander of B Troop the V.C.B., was in a sweat.

For the past week life had been agreeable if confusing. With his signaller and his technical-assistant (a pair of highly efficient N.C.O.s) he had occupied a succession of forward observation posts selected more for comfort than observation. The weather had been perfect. The Colonel's gout had kept him out of the way. There had been nothing to do but lounge in the sun, play cards, read magazines and brew-up. Occasionally, for the look of the thing, he had passed a few

much fire-orders back to the guns . . . then another brew-up.

But now, suddenly, the battle had closed in on him. His observation post, behind a stone wall on top of a hill, had become damnably over-populated. Without the slightest warning a flock of jeeps had bounced out of the blue, disgorging the Colonel, a battalion commander of the Elmshire Light Infantry and two exceedingly high-ranking referees.

The situation was soon made painfully clear to Vivian. Very shortly the infantry, now deployed in the valley below, would start to attack up the rising ground opposite with a view to securing the summit. Unfortunately they were at present pinned down by machine-gun and mortar fire from the ruined farm buildings on the left of the ridge. It would be his job to bring all the guns of the V.C.B. to bear on this plague spot and destroy it.

In effect, he was now the key-man of the entire Exercise Cross-stitch. For, if he failed to demolish the farm buildings, the referees would not allow the infantry to attack; the ridge would not be captured; the vital gap in the enemy's centre would not be forced; and the cunning tactical trap developed by the Redland command would come to nought.

• All this was disturbing enough. But Vivian had a far worse problem on his hands: the figure in sergeant's uniform crouching on the turf beside him. For to-day that uniform did not contain his technical-assistant, Sergeant Cooper. It contained, instead, Rose Petal.

It had all come about quite simply. The previous evening it seemed to Vivian that the exercise was flickering out. Only another day remained, and he was confident that nothing would now occur to disturb

his week of peace and quiet. Furthermore, what with the sunshine and the tedium, he was feeling the need of female company. He therefore drove into the nearest village and telephoned to Rose at St. Goneril's.

She, it turned out, was feeling equally frisky, and a rendezvous was arranged. She would drive down to the battle area overnight and put up at the village inn. There Vivian would call for her in his truck when the regiment moved into action at first light. She would change into Sergeant Cooper's uniform and deputise for him throughout the last day of the exercise.

Everything worked out perfectly, and by seven a.m. they were cosily tucked away behind their stone wall in the middle of Druid's Plain. The signaller whipped up an excellent picnic breakfast, then tactfully installed his wireless set out of sight around an angle of the wall.

The morning passed blissfully. The bare hillside throbbed and shimmered under the blistering sun. The air was charged with the heady aroma of burnt turf and hot thyme. Passion waxed with the mounting heat.

There were only two disturbing factors, both due to Rose's determination to present a smart and soldierly appearance worthy of the Venerable Company of Bombardiers. In order to make her straps and pouches fit snugly she had discarded her brassière, thereby suffering torments of tickling from her shirt, angola, drab. Thus she was apt to start scratching herself madly at critical moments. Secondly, on hearing that Sergeant Cooper sported a huge black handlebar moustache, she had prudently provided herself with a replica from the St. Goneril's amateur theatrical wardrobe. This she wore clipped to her nostrils, nor could she be persuaded to remove it, even in the

extremity of love. In consequence, whenever he kissed her, Vivian got a mouthful of horsehair.

At one o'clock they broke for luncheon. Rose had brought two flasks of iced hock and a lump of ham which they shared with the signaller. Meanwhile they watched with amusement the sweating infants deploying in the valley below. At two o'clock they were settling down to a passionate afternoon when the Colonel and his posse arrived.

The latter were now standing in an impressive group by their vehicles. With hawk-like glances they stared across the valley at the opposite ridge. From time to time they raised their shooting-sticks and made jabbing motions towards enemy territory. Then they glared sternly, if a little blankly, at their cumbersome map-cases covered with mazes of coloured pencil markings. Now one would suddenly whip his field-glasses to his eyes and bark a few clipped phrases between tight lips. Now another would turn away and hack at the turf with his heel, his chin sunk on his breast as he grappled with the tactical problems of the moment.

Waiting for his final orders, Vivian grew more and more anxious. He knew from bitter experience exactly what would happen. He would have a mass of vague and conflicting advice thrown at him, plus a terse command to get on with the job and look sharp about it. And if anything went wrong, he would be Joe C.

He tried to pull himself together. The main thing was to finish his task quickly. As long as Rose kept in the background there was a fair chance that no one would spot her. Disguised under her tin hat and tremendous moustache she would, with any luck, pass muster as his technical-assistant. He thrust a book of

range-tables into her hands and turned to meet the Colonel.

"Well, now, Handspike, you know what you have to do. It's up to you. Let's see some quick, accurate ranging on to the target . . ."

They were interrupted by the rear of a motor-cycle breasting the slope in rear. A moment later Splasher Grummit was amongst them. Unorthodox in all things, he had no time for staff-cars and jeeps. When touring the battlefield, he invariably used a motor-cycle which he rode with terrific dash and skill.

His appearance was noteworthy, belonging as he did to the fancy-dress school of Genefals. This afternoon he wore desert boots, pale lawn corduroy trousers, a tight sweater reaching almost to his knees, a battle-dress jacket, a dazzling Paisley silk scarf, and a yellow woollen skull-cap with a bushy pom on top.

He was clearly in capital form. He raised a negligent forefinger to the stiffly saluting group and called for the Forward Observation Officer. Vivian shambled up.

"Now, my boy. You taking this little shoot?"

"Yes, sir."

"What's your name?"

"Handspike, sir."

"Any relation to Tearaway Handspike of the Fifteenth R.H.A.?"

"My uncle, sir."

"Delighted to hear it. If you've got a quarter of his guts and gumption you'll do very nicely. Now, you know what's on?"

"Yes, sir. I've got to bring the whole regiment down on the farm buildings and destroy them."

"Splendid. And I'll stay and watch you do it."

Once a gunner, always a gunner. Just show these infants what the old V.C.B. can do."

As he settled himself on the stone wall he glanced at Rose. "Afternoon, Sergeant. Damn fine moustache you've got there. A credit to the regiment and no mistake about it."

The Colonel, who was feeling rather snubbed, advanced and offered his map-case. The General waved him away.

"No! thanks. Got one of my own somewhere."

He dived into his trousers' pocket and produced a tattered map screwed up into a tight ball. He shook it open with a shower of cigarette nubs and biscuit crumbs.

"Bloody useless things, maps. Never tell which way up they go. What I always say is a good gunner don't need maps. He shoots by instinct. However, they come in handy as picnic napkins. Now, Handspike, get cracking."

Vivian braced his shoulders and passed his fire-orders to the signaller. Shortly afterwards there was a thud in the distance and the first ranging round whistled overhead. Six pairs of field-glasses focused on the farm buildings. There was another thud as the shell landed. But there was nothing to see. Not the faintest puff of smoke or dust.

Vivian swore under his breath. It was going to be a horribly difficult shoot. In this undulating country there was so much dead ground. You could sprinkle rounds all over the place and never see a burst. He dropped the range by four hundred yards, with the same result. Cold sweat gathered in his armpits. He *must* get a round on the ground where he could see it and establish his line of fire. He dropped eight hundred

and prayed earnestly. Again the sequence of thud-whistle-thud. Again the landscape remained undisturbed.

He glanced around. The Colonel was glowering brutally. The infantry officer was smiling cynically. The two referees were politely looking the other way. The General had folded his arms on his chest and seemed to be fast asleep.

Vivian clenched his fists and turned to his signaller. Then, as he opened his mouth to croak another order, Rose's voice cut through the silence.

"For God's sake splash-it-about-a-bit. Drop another thousand."

The General whirled around. "Who said that?"

Rose came smartly to attention. "I did, sir."

The General gave her a long penetrating stare. Then, reaching forward, he tapped her lightly on the bosom with the back of his hand.

"And quite right too, Sergeant. Handspike, I recommend you to take the advice of your technical-assistant who seems to have a thorough grasp of the basic principles of gunnery."

Now slightly delirious, Vivian gabbled out his order. The result was all that could be desired. A round landed in full view on the opposite slope. His confidence immediately returned and he quickly got a verified short bracket on the target. The concentrated fire of the regiment was brought to bear, the farm buildings were destroyed and the infantry began their advance. Exercise Cross-stitch would shortly end in a glorious victory for the forces of Redland.

The party broke up and Splasher made for his motor-cycle. He kicked up the engine and settled himself in the saddle. Then he paused and pointed to Rose.

"Sergeant! Come here."

Rose doubled forward and stood to attention. The General spoke a few words that were drowned by the noise of the motor. Then something entirely unexpected happened. As he engaged the clutch, Rose jumped up behind him and was whisked away over the crest in a cloud of dust and flying turf.

Half an hour later they reached Nun's Veiling, a secluded village on the western edge of the Plain. The General swung his machine through a pillared gateway and stopped in front of a Queen Anne house standing in a walled garden.

Rose dismounted, rubbing herself tenderly. "Thanks for the ride. Now what?"

"A bath first, I suggest. Then tea." The General unlocked the door and bowed her in. "I'm afraid there's nobody here to look after us, but I've no doubt we shall manage."

Rose hesitated a moment, then crossed the threshold into a dim cool hall. "Am I to understand that you own this place?"

"I do. Rather charming, don't you think? And so convenient. In the old days, when I was a Gunner, I spent so much time on the Plain that I found it desirable to have a civilised retreat close at hand. Somewhere to relax at week-ends and get on with my needle-work. I've kept the place on ever since; not that I manage to get down very often these days. However, there should be some pickled eggs and tinned stuff in the larder; and the cellar is quite respectable."

He led her upstairs and showed her into a bedroom scented with pot-pourri.

"There's a bathroom next door. Meanwhile, I'll

dig out some slacks and a shirt for you. They'll be a bit big, I'm afraid, but a deal less ticklesome than that battle-dress. See you later."

After a long scalding soak, Rose returned to the bedroom where she found a powder-blue silk shirt, grey flannels and a pair of Arab sandals. She was surprised, and a little vexed, to discover that Splasher's waist measurement was but two inches more than her own.

She joined him in the drawing-room where he was busy at the tea-tray. He had changed into civilian clothes by the simple expedient of taking off his battle-dress jacket. Whilst he plied her with plum cake and Lapsang Souchoong she eyed him thoughtfully.

He was a slasher and no mistake about it. Almost a caricature of his type. Crisp greying hair; small sharp features; remote blue eyes; lean and rakish as a hunting cheetah. How old was he? Must be around sixty she calculated, though he didn't look a day over forty. And how lovely he smelt; that blend of dry warm skin, expensive soap and fresh laundry.

He sank into the chair opposite to her and crossed his elegant legs.

"Well, I must say that for me at any rate this is a most unexpected pleasure. If all training-schemes ended like this there'd be some sense in being a soldier. By the way, you still have the advantage of me."

"Petal. Rose Petal. And whilst we're at it, General Grummit, I'd like to know . . ."

He held up a thin brown hand. "Please. No formality. We're off duty now. Call me Splasher, won't you? Everybody does."

"Thank you. What I'd like to know is how you found out. I thought my disguise was pretty good."

He twinkled at her across the table. "It was indeed, especially the whisker. But there were one or two small imperfections. Senior N.C.O.s in the British Army rarely spray themselves with *Sueur d'Extase*. Nor do they boast pneumatic bosoms."

"H'm, I see. Careless of me. And did you really mean what you said about Vivian Handspike?"

"What did I say?"

"That unless I went for a ride with you, you'd have him cashiered."

"Did I say that?"

"You did. Rather pokerly of you, I think."

"I assure you I didn't mean it. As a matter of fact, I took quite a fancy to the boy. That was a capital little shoot he did, once you'd put him on the right line. I shall see that he gets promotion without delay."

"Then why did you say such a nasty thing?"

"Because I so much wanted to make your acquaintance, and that seemed the quickest way to set about it."

Rose wriggled slightly. "I still think it was horrid of you to threaten like that. Why couldn't you ask me to tea nicely, in a civilised manner?"

"If I had, would you have accepted?"

Rose blushed, fluttered her eyelashes and examined her tea-leaves.

"Well, would you? Come, now, *would* you?"

She looked up and gave him a bone-melter. "Of course I would, Splasher. The moment I saw you I thought you were a perfect pet. Especially in that little woollen cap with the bobble on top."

Later they played duets on the piano. Then they walked round the garden and picked roses for each other. Then they drank a lot of gin.

When Rose came down into the hall after tidying herself for dinner, the General was at the telephone. "Is that the Nun's Repose? This is General Grummit speaking. I want you to reserve a single room for a Miss Petal, to-night. And see that sheets are properly aired . . ."

A warm hand closed over his hand and took the instrument.

"Hello. You can cancel that reservation. It won't be needed. The nun will be reposing elsewhere."

Rose awoke at ten a.m. Presently she heaved herself up on one elbow and smiled down lovingly at her mate. He lay flat on his back with his hands crossed on his breast. Even in his sleep he looked trim and alert. What a ducky he was in his white silk pyjamas. And no man had any right to such fabulous eyelashes. She roused him with a sharp burst of kisses.

In due course they began to think about breakfast.

"We'll eat on the verandah," said the General. "The coffee will be ready in a quarter of an hour. You'll find a spare dressing-gown in the wardrobe."

"Splasher, darling!"

He paused in the doorway. "Yes, my love?"

"You haven't forgotten the promise you made last night?"

"What promise?"

"About making Vivian a Major."

"Oh, yes, I remember. But that was last night. I've changed my mind since then."

Rose sat bolt upright. "What the devil do you mean?"

He gave her a sparkling smile and blew her a kiss. "Exactly what I say. Last night I thought I'd have

him promoted Major. This morning I've decided to have him made full Colonel."

When she came through the french windows on to the verandah he started to his feet and knocked over the cream jug. For Rose was not wearing one of his spare dressing-gowns. Instead she was wrapped in an elegant pearl-pink peignoir of satin and lace.

"My dear girl, where on earth did you get that from?"

She sat down slowly and gave him a cold stare across the coffee-pot.

"I found it tucked away at the back of the wardrobe. And what I'd like to know is where did *you* get it from?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. I simply can't imagine . . ."

"Indeed? Then this may help to jog your memory."

She indicated the delicately embroidered monogram over her left breast. "S. C. That's what it says. S. C."

"Good God. It must be Sophy's."

Rose took a sip at her coffee and lit a cigarette. "You refer, I assume, to Miss Sophy Cleft?"

At this the General's astonishment exceeded all bounds.

"But . . . but how did you guess? What do *you* know about Sophy Cleft?"

Rose dropped another lump of sugar into her cup. "You'd be surprised. Indeed I'm beginning to feel that she and I are quite old friends."

## 6

*Uncle Ned's Postbag* was the current smash-hit of British television, eclipsing even the quiz-games, the cookery lessons and the ball-and-hoop maniacs.

The basic idea was simple enough : a weekly half-hour programme dealing with the intimate problems of family life. Its stupendous success was due to the arresting personality of 'The Fireside Philosopher' himself.

Uncle Ned was presented as a venerable rustic wise-acre seated in a rocking-chair beside a humble hearth. He wore a tasselled smoking-cap, a smock with a spotted neckerchief, corduroy trousers tied below the knee with binder-twine, and hob-nailed boots. A fringe-type beard festooned his jaw from ear to ear. A corkscrew ash-plant lay between his knees. His left hand grasped a charred cherrywood pipe. His right reposed upon a family bible.

His style fitted his appearance. Selecting one of the week's problem-letters, he read it aloud in a gravelly voice thickened by a West Country burr. Then he meditated awhile, puffing at his pipe, nodding his head and even spitting into the grate if the conundrum were especially knotty. Finally he delivered his advice, not as one addressing an audience of millions, but rather as one soliloquising by his own fireside in the eventide of life.

The tone was soothing and homely, touched up with shafts of pawky humour and quaint countrified phrases, many of which had already passed into the daily

vocabulary of the viewing public. The emphasis was on shrewd common sense combined with warm human understanding ; the whole based upon sound Christian principles. Nor was he ever at a loss. Grumpy husbands, embittered wives, frustrated boy-friends, anxious girl-friends : for one and all he had a ready remedy drawn from his fund of earthy wisdom.

But the crowning touch was the mystery surrounding his identity. To the great public he was Uncle Ned and nothing more. Who was he ? Where did he come from ? What of his private life ? The subject was endlessly debated across unnumbered supper tables. Speculation was rife in the popular press. Some maintained that he was a genuine country bumpkin. Others opined that he was a notorious film-star in disguise ; or, better still, a celebrated member of the Opposition front bench. But all to no purpose. Uncle Ned remained a mystery . . . and a national figure of the first magnitude.

Sir Roland Gander was a particularly ardent fan and never missed a *Postbag*, come what might.

This July evening he was giving a large dinner party, and his guests had been forced to bolt their food at top speed in order to get to the set in time for the programme. They were all in eighteenth-century costume, for later they were going on to the masked ball at Cantaloup House : a much publicised charity affair under the patronage of Tom Brown who hoped to get a knighthood out of it.

At last Sir Roland switched off the set and allowed the coffee and liquors to come in. He cut a fine figure in his powdered wig, brocade coat, knee-breeches and silk stockings.

"No, I frankly confess I've no idea who he is. I've

made enquiries here and there, but the secret is very well kept. I wish I could find out, for I would like to congratulate him personally. In my view, he is more than a mere entertainer. He is a most Beneficial Influence in the life of the nation. In these days of shoddy sensationalism and lurid . . .”

“Beneficial influence my foot,” muttered Piers Gaveston. “If you ask me, Uncle Ned is just a half-baked yokel with a damn good script-writer behind him.”

He had manoeuvred Louise into a convenient corner where he could work havoc with the brandy and peer at leisure into the breath-taking décolletage of her Lancret shepherdess gown.

“Whatever he is,” replied Louise, “I’m certain he’s no yokel. Did you notice that close-up of his right hand to-night?”

“Not particularly. Why?”

“The bones were as fine as a woman’s. Nor do yokels customarily wear antique Aztec rings on their little fingers. If you’d been paying attention to the screen instead of gloating over my peninsulars you’d have spotted it. A really lovely thing in the shape of a plumed serpent; a proper museum piccc.”

“You’re very observant. What’s your guess?”

“I suspect he is a man of breeding with cultivated tastes. And in view of his talent for saying nothing whatsoever at great length, I conclude that he is, or was, connected with the Diplomatic Service. Furthermore, I’ve a notion he’s a sizzling old rackapelt . . . and just my cup of tea.”

In due course Sir Roland and his party arrived at Cantaloup House. The vast ballroom, lit by fabulous chandeliers, was a dazzling spectacle. For weeks past,

the occasion had been diligently whooped-up with every device of modern publicity. Some five hundred customers, in gorgeous silks and black dominoes, were shambling round the parquet. A like number were swarming at the buffets or recuperating in the sitting-out rooms.

Louise took her dancing seriously and never consented to go on the floor until well flushed with liquor. She was fuelling-up with Piers Gaveston at the champagne-bar when her attention was attracted by an elegant gentleman standing in profile on her left. He was a pleasure to look at.

Slightly built, of middling height, he wore his costume with incomparable grace. His features were fine and aquiline, his manner suave and nonchalant. From time to time he delicately took snuff. He was the centre of a sizeable mixed group who seemed to find his conversation greatly entertaining.

Louise edged nearer. As soon as she got within earshot her interest redoubled, for the gentleman was discoursing fluently in at least four foreign tongues. She identified French, Spanish, Italian and Russian in as many minutes.

Presently the band began to play a Strauss waltz, whereupon he cocked an ear, ripped off a burst of lisping Castilian at a pneumatic brunette and steered her towards the ballroom. Louise instantly grabbed hold of Piers and set off in pursuit.

As she had guessed, the polyglot was a notable performer. The floor was atrociously crowded, and his partner was at least three stone heavier than himself, but in spite of these handicaps he whirled his way through the throng with never a check or a collision.

Suddenly, glancing around, he caught sight of Louise

staring at him over Piers' shoulder. He promptly changed direction, swooped through the ruck and drew alongside. For a long moment a pair of glittering blue eyes inspected her through the slits of the mask. Then, with a flashing smile, he twirled away. Louise glanced down at herself. She had the curious feeling that she was stark naked.

By midnight she was heartily sick of the whole affair. With the sole exception of Piers Gaveston, who was now fighting drunk, all the men she had tangled with were crashing bores. The wine was bad, the food worse, the atmosphere suffocating. And now she was trapped at the bar by Tom Brown who looked like a pantomime flunkie in his fancy-dress.

She was refusing for the tenth time his pressing invitation to share a week-end at Brighton when a waiter came up and gave her a folded slip of paper.

'Adorable creature, I await you at the front door. Do not fail me. My heart is in your hands.'

Louise did not hesitate. She picked up her handbag and gave Tom Brown a smile that chopped him off at the knees.

"I'm so sorry, I shall have to leave you. Will you please tell Sir Roland that I've been called away on urgent private business. And I hope it keeps fine for you at Brighton."

She snatched her wrap from the cloakroom, darted across the hall and emerged into the sultry summer night. A black Bristol was standing at the kerb with the door open. A hand reached out and beckoned. She ran down the steps and got in.

"Well, here I am." She thrust her cupped hands towards him. "And here's your lost property."

"Delicious ravishment. You speak in riddles."

"Your heart. You advised me it was in my hands."

"Pray keep it as a humble token of my affection and esteem."

"It is worth having?"

"By and large, I think it is. A little love-worn, perhaps, a little chipped around the edges. But tender, I promise you, and full of good reading."

They shot out of Mayfair and turned up Park Lane.

"Where are we going?" asked Louise. "Or is it a mystery tour?"

"We're bound for Monk's Frisking."

"Is that a place? Or a new parlour game?"

"It is my family seat in the heart of Elmshire where I pass my declining years rearing fat cattle and playing the organ in the village church."

"Isn't it rather a long way at this time of night?"

"Nowhere is a long way in a car like this . . . and with a girl like you."

"That may be. But I have to be at work at nine o'clock to-morrow morning."

"Don't give it a second thought. I telephoned your excuses to Rolo's flat before we left. Your grandmother in Ampney, Gloucestershire has had a fit and you'll be away until Monday."

"You think of everything. How did you know that I work for Sir Roland?"

"My dear girl, everybody knows Louise Gale, Sir Roland Gander's secretary."

"Obliged, I'm sure."

"But it's true. You're the talk of the town, especially since Tom Brown tried to buy you for five thousand pounds."

Louise pulled off her domino. "As you know so much about me there's not much sense in wearing this

thing any longer. And I really think it's about time . . ."

"But of course." He unmasked with a flourish. "Evelyn Chancery at your service."

She gave him a keen sidelong glance. He chuckled and shook his head.

"No, my dear. *You* won't recognise *me*. There was a time when these haggard features enjoyed a certain renown. But when Evelyn Chancery was in his heyday, you were in the nursery."

At two o'clock they reached Monk's Frisking, passed through a pillared gateway, and stopped in front of a comfortable redbrick house.

Evelyn led her into his private snugery and pushed the sofa nearer to the fire still glowing in the open hearth. Flasks, sandwiches and a grog-tray stood on a side table.

"I hope they've left something eatable. . . . The servants, by the way, sleep out."

"Of course. They always do."

"Is that intended as a barbed retort?"

"Not at all. Just a plain statement of fact. I seem to have a disturbing effect on servants. Whenever I come in at the front door, they fly out at the back." She nodded towards the table. "I notice there are two of everything. Your staff must include crystal-gazing amongst their duties."

"My housekeeper is an optimist. What will you have?"

"I'd like a long weak whisky-and-water to start with."

"A capital notion. I'll join you."

He brought the tumblers across and stood looking down at her in the soft light of the single standard

lamp. "Relaxed against the cushions, she had a really good view of him for the first time without his mask. He was a stylish old rip and no mistake about it. And how old *was* he? If he were a contemporary of Rolo he must be verging on sixty. But in this light, at any rate, he could get away with ten years less. These professional town-rakes, it seemed, were completely fireproof.

He bowed and switched on his demoralising smile. "To your very good health, Louise."

As he lifted the glass to his lips his right hand came into the full light of the lamp, whereupon Louise sat bolt upright, her eyes wide, her lips agape. Then she raised her own glass.

"And to yours, Uncle Ned."

He started so violently that half his drink slopped into her lap.

"Good God! How did you guess?"

"Just a keen eye for detail. That ring. They did a close-up of your hand in to-night's programme. I noticed it at once."

"How very careless of me."

"I agree. You've poured half a bottle of whisky on to my stomach."

"I say, I'm most terribly sorry. Let me fetch you a napkin to mop up with . . ."

"Don't bother. It's beyond mopping."

"But you can't sit there in a wringing-wet frock."

"I don't intend to. If you'll help me with these hooks I'll take it off. I shall be losing it very shortly, anyway."

"What a sensible girl you are."

"Don't say that. I can't bear it."

"But why not?"

"Because the last time I was called a sensible girl I was gravely disappointed."

There was a rustle of taffeta.

"Good. You did that very nicely."

"Thank you. I'm not normally a clumsy man, you see. It was just that you shook me wide open with that Uncle Ned stuff. Are you sure you won't be chilly like that?"

"Not at all. Silk stockings are surprisingly warm."

She lit a cigarette and stretched out on the sofa.

"Well, tell me all about it."

"There's not much to tell, really. I always had a knack for impersonations and mimicry. In fact when I was Third Secretary in Madrid way back in . . ."

"So you *were* in the Diplomatic Service?"

"Yes. Until I went into the fish export trade. However, that's another story. As I was saying, I have always had a taste for cutting capers in fancy-dress; and some months ago, at a week-end party, I was urged to give my celebrated rendering of a rustic gaffer. Unbeknownst to me, one of the guests was Humboldt-Hanker the television tycoon. He had me on the test-bench within twenty-four hours, and in due course we hatched up the *Postbag*. It's quite good fun, I must say. The letters I get. You wouldn't believe it."

"They're really genuine? You don't make them up?"

"Make them up! My dear child, to invent a post-bag like Uncle Ned's you'd have to be a mixture of Dostoevsky, the Marquis de Sade and Choderlos de Laclos. They're genuine all right."

"Even that one last week from the outraged Nanny whose little clasp jabbed her in the bottom with a

happin' every time she bent down to mend the fire?"

"That one I can certainly vouch for, since it is drawn from my own experience. So large and soft and inviting it was. I just couldn't resist it. No wonder I got my fencing blue at Oxford. Some more whisky?"

"Yes, a lot more. Tell me, why are you keeping yourself a mystery?"

Evelyn raised an eyebrow and shrugged. "Would you have me, a Chancery of Monk's Frisking, parading myself before the rabble as a common buffoon? My ancestors would rotate in their graves like so many teetotums."

"You're very fastidious."

"A gentleman has a duty towards himself and his peers. In more civilised times, if a man of breeding set up as author he always did so under a pen-name. I see no reason to depart from that practice when facing the cameras."

"Then I fail to understand why you bother with the thing at all. It can't be the fees they pay you, because we all know what they aren't. And you don't cash in on the side by endorsing fountain-pens and cigarette-lighters. And working anonymously you don't even get the fun of personal notoriety."

He wagged a reproving forefinger. "You've been absorbing too much Dr. Johnson who, being both a bore and a boor, is no fit company for charming little ravishments. Money is *not* the only reason for an artist's exercising his talents . . ."

The grandfather clock in the corner struck three.

" . . . and talking of exercise?"

Twenty minutes later Louise clanked into the

commodious four-poster, propped herself against the pillows and examined the books on the night-table. Suddenly she made a grab and came up with a slim volume in a brilliant yellow wrapper. *Love In Our Time*, by Rupert Thorn.

‘ Love in our time  
Is a rusty tin grown through with grass  
In the deserted corner of a brickyard,  
And dust whipped in the eyes .

She was interrupted by a whiff of heliotropes. Evelyn, freshly shaved and wrapped in a robe of watered silk, had emerged from his dressing-room. He looked over her shoulder.

“ A rusty tin grown through with grass, indeed ! You like that sort of stuff ? ”

“ I haven’t had time to find out yet, but I like the author.”

“ Really ? You know him ? ”

“ I have made his acquaintance.”

“ May I ask where you met him ? ”

“ In bed.”

“ Naturally. But where ? ”

“ In Bellagio, last June.”

“ What was he doing there ? ”

“ Acting as local host to a travel agency and polishing up the script of his forthcoming verse-drama in five acts.” She looked up from the book. “ Why are you so interested in him, anyway ? Do you know him too ? ”

“ He happens to be my nephew.”

“ I say, what fun.”

“ You think so ? ” He didn’t tell you his future plans, did he ? Please don’t think that I’m being inquisitive. It’s just that whenever Rupert returns to England all

his relatives go abroad. We find it says a great deal of wear and tear."

"I'm sorry I can't help you. I only spent one night in his company, and that was entirely devoted to correcting the script of *The Jetman's Revenge*."

"That I find difficult to believe."

"Not half so difficult as I do."

She lay back, her hands linked behind her head. "Well, Uncle Ned? Shall we try and get some polish on that rusty tin?"

Next morning.

"Uncle Ned . . .

"For God's sake stop calling me that, Louise. My name is Evelyn, and I prefer to be addressed as such. What is it you want *now*? Because if so, you've had it."

"I was merely going to observe what a funny place to be tattooed. Was it *very* painful?"

"Extremely. I couldn't sit down for a fortnight."

"But, darling, it's *beautiful*. Let me see. Two hearts transfixed by an arrow, *and* a lot of writing. What does it say? E.C. in one, and S.C. in the other . . . E.C., that's you, of course. Evelyn Chancery. And S.C.? Who was S.C.?"

"The most enchanting woman I have ever known. The only woman I was ever in serious danger of marrying. The inimitable, the one and only Sophy Cleft."

"But of course. I might have guessed it."

"How could you have possibly guessed it? Why, you can't ever have heard of her. Sophy has been lost to human ken for the past twenty years and more."

"So I understand from Sir Roland Gander. But I'm beginning to recognise the symptoms. Whenever

you old roustabouts suddenly go all maudlin and sink your voices to a love-sodden whisper, there's one thing and one thing only in the wind : Sophy Cleft. I keenly look forward to making her acquaintance."

"Then I'm afraid you'll be disappointed. In view of her long silence one can only conclude that poor Sophy has passed on. She was a very rowdy girl."

Louise shook her head. "I can't believe it. Judging by her playmates, Sophy Cleft is indestructible."

MALMSEY CLOSE, Sophy Cleft's country retreat, was a charming thatched cottage standing in two acres of heavily wooded grounds. A trunk-road from London to the south coast pierced the village of Malmsey Hautboys ; but the Close, islanded in green serenity, might have been three hundred miles from the city instead of only thirty.

Sophy was hard at work in a canopied swing-seat on the lawn, by the edge of a large lily-pond. Balanced in her lap was a portable typewriter which she operated with great rapidity and inaccuracy by means of the hunt-and-peck method. On a table at her right hand were a tumbler of Perrier, a pile of foolscap and a smouldering cigar. Nearby on the grass lay some battered packing-cases, and a brindled bulldog snoring horribly.

As the clock over the stables chimed five, she put aside her machine and extracted a crumpled cable-form from the shambles on the table.

'Regret delayed until Thursday. Bugged down in blood and lust. Rupert.'

Sophy shook her head and murmured fondly. "The darling boy. His Uncle Evelyn all over again."

Her reflections were interrupted by the sound of a car stopping at the front door. A few moments later Rupert appeared around the angle of the house. He was a noteworthy sight. His skull was wrapped in a cap of white bandages. A plaster cast encased his left

ankle and foot, exposing only the naked toes. He was supported on a pair of crutches.

Sophy rose from her seat and scrutinised him thoughtfully. "Well, my boy, all I can say is this : whoever she was, she wasn't worth it."

"Agreed."

"One of those indefatigable Latins, I suppose? They never know where to draw the line."

"On the contrary. A Scandinavian."

"Oh dear! Even worse. When *they* draw the line it's always a vicious circle."

She settled him tenderly in a chair and gave him a drink. "And now let's hear all about it, omitting no detail however scabrous."

"I'm afraid there's little to tell. Before we had time to foster our friendship her husband threw me over the balcony. Such a big, cross man."

"Was it very high?"

"The balcony was. The ground seemed rather low."

"Tell me, what *does* one do on the way down? Is it really true that the whole of one's past life unfolds itself in 3-D Technicolor?"

"I prayed. Quite deafeningly. Hence my freedom from serious injury."

"I should have thought a bashed skull and a broken ankle were serious enough."

Rupert flashed a glittering smile out of his mask of sun-tan. "A grazed temple and a sprained ankle. No more."

"Then why all the bandages and the plaster cast?"

"There's money in it. At least I hope so. Workman's compensation and all that. I propose to mulct the Marco Polo travel agency for injuries received in the course of my professional duties. I've got a really

splendid medical certificate from the local quack. In return for a ten per cent. commission he was prepared to fix me up with anything from impacted bunions to the Black Death. Nothing like knowing the right people."

"And for how long do you intend to go about like an exhumed zombie?"

"Only until to-morrow morning when I shall call on my late employers and threaten them with a thumping great action for damages. Supported by my medical certificate, I expect to achieve a handsome settlement on the spot."

"I hope you succeed. That fancy-dress must be most exhausting; though you manage those crutches very cleverly, I notice."

"But of course. I always use them when travelling. Wonderful the service and attention one gets. Porters, waiters, stewards, customs officials, they can't do enough. Why, I haven't stood in a queue or carried my own bag since I left school. It restores one's faith in human nature."

The bulldog, meanwhile, had been nuzzling away at Rupert's bare foot.

"Adolphe seems to have taken quite a fancy to you," said Sophy. "You should be flattered. Normally he reserves judgment until he's sampled the bouquet of the visitor's blood."

"He's licked most of the paint off my toe-nails," replied Rupert testily. "Extremely annoying. Now I shall have to do them all over again."

He rummaged in his jacket pocket and produced a camel-hair brush and a bottle of Shocking Pink varnish. Then, with the utmost concentration, he fell to renewing the lacquer on the toes protruding from the plaster cast.

"I find this keeps up my morale," he explained. "Like dressing for dinner in the jungle and shaving twice daily at the North Pole. One must present a smart and soldierly appearance at all times."

He glanced up. The bulldog was edging forward again, his jaws slavering at the sight of the glistening enamel.

"Would you awfully mind getting rid of that hound? He'll be at me again in half a second, and this is my last bottle."

Sophy slapped the dog on the haunches and gestured towards the house. "Tea, Adolphe, tea!"

Rupert watched the animal waddle away and then resumed his work. "An agreeable beast. Though why you call him Adolphe I can't imagine."

"Because, like the hero of Constant's masterpiece, il trouve qu'aucun but ne vaut la peine d'aucun effort. In fact he's so damned idle that when the sparks from the fireplace set him alight he just lies there grumbling and smouldering until someone finds time to extinguish him."

"Sensible fellow," said Rupert. "I must talk to him about the advantages of using crutches."

At this point a curious procession emerged from the house. First came Adolphe, shambling backwards and growling peevishly, his teeth locked in the skirt of a raw-boned parlour-maid. She, in turn, was tottering backwards, tugging at the handle of a heavily laden tea-wagon. From time to time the trolley baulked on the uneven ground, causing the entire outfit to jag to a halt like a shunting train; whereupon Adolphe set all in motion once more with a sharp heave, a vicious snarl and a rending of black poplin.

Sophy watched the performance with a happy smile.

"You know, that dog's better than a major-domo. Every meal appears dead on time . . . though the servants never seem to stay very long, I'm afraid. So few people, nowadays, are really fond of animals."

After tea, Rupert stoked up his pipe and lay back in his chair. "Well, how's the book going? I hope you haven't been wasting your time, because I've already sent a warning letter to Shamus Skindle, my publisher, telling him that he can expect something interesting in the near future."

Sophy indicated the writing equipment and the packing-cases. "I haven't lost a moment since I got home. I've turned out all my old letters and keepsakes, and I've been making some random notes. Nothing elaborate. Just a few jottings about outstanding episodes. You might care to glance through them."

Rupert plunged eagerly into the wad of typescript. As he read, his enthusiasm steadily increased. He leaned forward, over the table, turning the pages as fast as his eyes could absorb the print. Low whistles, delighted snorts, gasps of amazement escaped his lips. Repeatedly he flung himself back in his seat, racked by agonising belly-laughes.

"It's tremendous, Sophy! Absolutely shattering! This is just what we need to set Shamus agog. I'll leave it with him first thing to-morrow morning so that he can read it through before we lunch together. Unless I'm much mistaken, I shall find him whirling round the Minerva like a giant pin-wheel."

Presently Rupert settled down to a more detailed study, pausing frequently to make copious notes. At last he looked up.

"You know, there's one thing that strikes me very forcibly about all this. You've summarised some two

dozen incidents here, and in every case the leading characters are the same. There's yourself, of course ; and my Uncle Evelyn who, I'm delighted to note, is always well up with the hounds ; and this Rolo fellow who keeps coming out of sinks of iniquity even faster than he went in ; and someone called Minnie who habitually raffles her knickers in aid of deserving charities ; and, finally, there's the man Splasher who dedicates his life to needlework and tossing poached eggs into upper-class bosoms."

"Of course the same names keep popping up," said Sophy. "The incidents I have related there are all culled from the hey-day of my career, the nineteen-twenties and early thirties. At that time there were five of us who were absolutely inseparable. Myself, Evelyn Chancery, Rolo Gander, Minnie Blazer and Splasher Grummit. I don't want to boast, but I can assure you that we enjoyed a global reputation. Our sunny dispositions and infectious high spirits were renowned from Maidenhead to Mogador. When Sophy's circus topped the horizon, the local bars took their doors off the hinges, the British Consulate put up the shutters, and all right-thinking parents locked their offspring in the cellar."

She sighed profoundly. "And look at us now ! It hardly bears thinking of. Myself cultivating prize roses and sleeping in a single bed. Rolo Gander a cabinet minister. Minnie Blazer headmistress of St. Goneril's. Splasher Grummit almost a Field Marshal. And your Uncle Evelyn, television's Uncle Ned."

"What ! What did you say ?"

Oblivious of his rutches, Rupert soared out of his chair as if rowelled by a scorpion.

"But, my dear boy, surely you knew ?"

"How could I know? I've been abroad for over a year. And, if it comes to that, how do *you* know? According to the English newspapers, the identity of Uncle Ned is one of the darkest mysteries of modern times."

"Not to me. It sticks out like a choirboy's ears."

"But what evidence have you?"

"The evidence of my own eyes. I saw Evelyn do that act twice nightly for a solid month in the Camel's Hump in Alexandria way back in twenty-six. Of course it isn't quite the same act now. His scholarly fund of Arabic love proverbs would scarcely stand translation for the B.B.C. But the main features of the performance are unmistakable. Uncle Ned is Evelyn Chancery all right."

After dinner they passed a nostalgic half-hour examining some of Sophy's souvenirs. Rupert dug about in the packing-cases with the keenest interest.

"I say, what's this extraordinary mass of woollen stuff? Yards and yards of it, look, all done up in tissue paper and blue ribbon."

"Those, my lad, are the First Sea Lord's combinations, the ones that gave me a nervous breakdown. You see what I mean? All these little vents and fanlights and loopholes. One never knows *what* to expect."

"Quite so. And this damn great portcullis in rear. No wonder you developed an anxiety neurosis."

"This broken bottle may interest you. It's the one with which I snarthened up a blasphemous ambassador in the Café de Paris. If you look closely you'll see some blood and hair still adhering to the spikes. No more *lèse-majesté* out of him."

Rupert swooped on a wisp of black chiffon. "My word, these are rather provoking. And devilish

draughty, too, I should imagine. Who wasted everybody's time, including her own, with these?"

"Let me see. Oh yes, those were Minnie Blazer's, the pair she auctioned at the Quorn hunt-ball in aid of the earth-stoppers' summer outing fund. Nancy Bunting bought them and donned them on the spot; whereupon Ambrose Bannister promptly relieved her of them in the Post Horn Gallop and gave them to me as a token of his affection and esteem . . . which was very civil of him, seeing that he was a passionate collector of such trifles. Note the exquisite hand-embroidery. Splasher Grummit's work, that. All the smart women bought their tearaways from him at that time. He had no private means, poor fellow, and it helped him with his mess bills."

"What is the significance of this set of false teeth?"

"Ah, those are one of my most treasured possessions. Rolo Gander won them off a Chilean millionairess on a Hellenic cruise in thirty-six. Poker dice it was. They played for forty-eight hours, non-stop, at the end of which time he had stripped her of all she possessed, including these mandibles. Some time later, when I was financially embarrassed, he lent them to me to pawn . . . which was really very Christian of him, as he valued them exceedingly. And in that other little box you'll find the loaded dice with which he won them. I feel there's a profound moral lesson in all that if only one could sort it out."

Sophy glanced at her watch and sprang to her feet. "Come along! We must hurry or we shall be late for *Uncle Ned's Postbag*. It's a special occasion to-night, you know. He's introducing a new character into his act. Some sort of female psychiatrist to provide the feminine angle on the family problems. Not a bad

notion. Your uncle always was choc-a-bloc' with colourful ideas."

"If it is my uncle: a theory which I find it very difficult to believe. However, we'll see."

Five minutes later Rupert was crouching forward in his chair in the darkened drawing-room, his eyes fixed on the screen as the Fireside Philosopher burred out his introductory remarks.

"My God, Sophy, you're right. It is the old boy, and no doubt about it. The way he joins his fingertips, and that saucy lift of the eyebrows. It's unmistakable."

"Exactly. What did I tell you? And now for this female. If Evelyn has had any say in the matter she should be worth a second glance."

The camera swung off Uncle Ned and focused on the parlour doorway. Sophy and Rupert gasped simultaneously.

"But it's that girl! The one at Bellagio who . . ."

"Precisely," said Rupert grimly. "Louise Gale. Evelyn, clearly, *has* had a say in the matter."

Somewhat later they were watching the newsreel. The very first item provided them with more food for thought, for it showed General Grummit arriving at London airport after his much publicised visit to the Soviet Union; and there to greet him, as he stepped into his car, was Miss Rose Petal, smiling all over her torso.

"What I like about television," said Sophy, "is the way it keeps you in touch with all your friends. I wonder which of my old playmates will turn up next."

Sir Roland Gander turned up next, addressing a monster open-air rally of the Fissionworkers' Union;

and seated just behind him on the platform was Louise Gale.

It came as no surprise when the last item revealed Miss Minnie Blazer, conducting a deputation of Jugoslavian educationists over St. Goncril's, supported throughout by the head-girl, Rosé Pétal.

Sophy turned off the set and mixed two stiff whiskies. "A very interesting evening. It seems that your friends and mine move in much the same circles."

Rupert made no reply. He was leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, his clenched fists pressed to his temples.

Sophy gave him an anxious glance. "I say, you look properly shaken. Is there anything the matter with you?"

"Yes. I'm thinking."

"Then mind you don't sprain the other ankle."

The next morning Sophy drove Rupert to the station in her antique Daimler, a beautifully preserved museum-piece with a very low, flat bonnet and an immensely lofty body. It was painted dark green with a deep band of wicker-work design in bright yellow at window level. A pair of carriage lamps flanked a windscreen like the side of a conservatory. The glistening tube of a tremendous bulb-horn coiled along the offside running-board.

"A proper gentleman's vehicle, this," said Rupert approvingly, as he spread himself at large in the back. "One can travel in an atmosphere of dignity and ordered calm, like a man of taste reclining in his own drawing-room. The only improvements I can suggest are an open fireplace and an eighteenth-century spinet."

Sophy climbed into the driving-seat and wedged her cigar more firmly between her teeth. "Yes, the old crate has served me well. If brass and iron could speak, she'd have some absorbing anecdotes to relate. I'll never forget the summer of twenty-seven when we took her over to North Africa. If I remember aright, we finished up with Minnie Blazer and a baby camel on the roof; Splasher Grummit and six Ouled-Nail belly-dancers in the back; Nancy Bunting and a Berber holy-man who'd tickled her fancy lashed to the luggage rack in rear; and Theo. Crozier, the present Bishop of Elmbury, astride the bonnet. Remind me to put that one in the book."

On reaching London, Rupert lost no time. He taxied to Bloomsbury and left Sophy's notes at Shamus Skindle's office; then he went on to Mayfair to the headquarters of the Marco Polo travel agency.

An hour later he emerged with the light of battle in his eye and a cheque for three hundred pounds in his pocket.

At one o'clock he was in the Minerva, facing his publisher across the turbot and Meursault. Shamus, as usual, looked like a Viking warrior in mufti. His magnificent body was wrapped in a beautiful grey flannel suit. His blond hair was shamelessly waved and pomaded. His gentian-blue eyes peered amiably over the glossy horns of a prodigious moustache.

"... and you say that when the outraged spouse threw you over the balcony you had recourse to prayer?"

"Yes. And I'm not ashamed of it, either."

"This is very interesting. Are you turning religious, Rupert?"

"If I'm pitched over enough balconies, probably shall. Why?"

"Because it would help your sales enormously if you could manage it."

"Scarcely my style, surely? You know perfectly well that people only read my stuff because it's so full of sex it makes them bite the knobs off the dresser-drawers."

"Exactly. And if you could develop a *sense of sin* they'd swallow them as well. That's just what your stuff needs: a pungent whiff of brimstone and hell-fire. Look at . . ."

"If you think I'm going to turn Papist or High Anglican, you're very much mistaken. If I do adopt a religion it will be one of those oriental ones where you can sit down on the jō. I'm not as young as I was."

It seemed to Rupert that Shamus was slow in coming to the point. He therefore topped up his glass and planted his elbows on the table.

"Well, have you read those notes I left with you this morning?"

"I have, old boy, I have."

"And what do you think of them?"

"Terrific. Between ourselves, I laughed like a fat lady."

"Good. I thought you'd be impressed. When do you intend to publish? I can have the thing ready in time for the Spring List."

There was a taut pause. Shamus fondled his moustache and looked vaguely into the middle distance. Then he shifted uncasily in his chair.

"The fact is, Rupert . . ."

"Yes? What?"

"The fact is, to be perfectly honest, I just don't see myself publishing that book at all."

"Have you gone mad? You just said it was terrific."

"A damn-sight too terrific. At a conservative estimate, there's a hundred thousand pounds' worth of libel on every page."

Rupert thrust back his chair. "But this is ridiculous. You can't mean it?"

"I do mean it. I wouldn't touch that stuff with the blunt end of a barge-pole. And nor would any other publisher in his senses."

Ten minutes later Shamus was still trying to pour oil on troubled waters.

"Do be reasonable, Rupert. This thing isn't a novel, it's an autobiography. All these people are *real*. What's more, they're some of the most distinguished citizens in the realm. Roland Gander, Minnie Blazer, General Grummit, they're national figures I tell you. What do you imagine their reactions would be?"

"I know what mine would be: a poignant nostalgia combined with a rosy glow of self-esteem."

"All right. Have it your own way. But in my opinion they'd all get on the blower, smartish, and seek the advice of eminent counsel."

Rupert glowered across the table. "Then that's your last word? You won't publish?"

"I daren't publish, old boy. And if you take my advice you won't waste any more time on the job because no other firm in the business will touch it either."

On the steps of the club Shamus patted Rupert's shoulder. "Well, good-bye, my dear fellow. Let me know how the new book of poems is coming along. And no hard feelings."

"Speak for yourself. Mine at the moment are reinforced concrete."

"And you'll bear that religious angle in mind, won't you? A keen *sense of sin*, that's what we need. Do try your best to develop one, there's a good chap."

With a flashing smile and a flourish of his umbrella, Shamus strode away. Then he wheeled about and came back.

"By the way, Rupert. Who is the gallant lady? I'm damn sorry I can't publish her book, but I'd very much like to meet her. Can't we arrange a little luncheon?"

He recoiled as Rupert hooked himself up, on his crutches and wagged a forefinger in his face.

"Listen, Skindle. So far as my lady friend is concerned, you can take a running jump at yourself. You've had your chance and you've thrown it away. From now on I'm keeping my little gold-mine to myself."

After this severe disappointment, Rupert felt the need for some quiet reflection. He took a taxi to the Green Park and settled himself in the shade on an improvised couch of chairs. Having retouched his toe-nails, an operation which speedily attracted a fascinated circle of spectators, he lit his pipe and gave himself up to thought.

Like most fanciful young men, he had a certain dogged streak in his character which responded to setbacks with a renewed determination. He was firmly convinced that Sophy Cleft's memoirs were a highly valuable property, and he was not going to waste them. As he pondered, his teeth locked ever more fiercely on the stem of his pipe; the set of his jaw grew ever more formidable. Suddenly he drew his spectacle-

frames from his breast pocket and settled them carefully on the tip of his nose. He was beginning to see daylight.

At three o'clock Rose and Louise came out of the Ritz with Tom Brown and Piers Gaveston. It had been a pleasant little luncheon party, marred only by a bitter wrangle over the bill. Piers had maintained that Tom ought to pay since he was a vermin-riddled capitalist and could charge it up to Domestic Electronics under Entertainment. Tom had taken the line that Piers ought to settle since he was notoriously in the pay of the Kremlin and could charge it up to Union funds under Subversive Propaganda. In the end they agreed to go halves, arguing so noisily over the odd halfpenny that the waiter had been obliged to ransack the hotel for two farthings.

Now, honour being satisfied, they bade their guests farewell and went off together to the House of Commons to make mock of Sir Roland Gander who was to deliver an important speech on industrial relations.

The two girls blew kisses after the departing cab, then lingered on the pavement in the afternoon sunshine before going their separate ways.

"You know, it's a funny thing about men," mused Rose. "The more you have, the less you're satisfied."

Louise, still drowsy with wine, yawned and stretched luxuriously. "It's a point of view. What's your trouble?"

"I wish I knew. By all reasonable standards I'm very nicely placed at the moment. General Grummit wants me to go to Ankara with him. Tom Brown wants to install me in a flat at Brighton. Piers Gaveston wants to take furnished rooms for me at Blackpool. And

Vivian Handslyke wants to marry me. They're all so sweet and charming in their way, but . . ."

"I know what you mean. I find exactly the same thing myself. Rolfe Gander and Evelyn Chancery are perfect pets, and yet . . ."

Rose screwed up her eyes and gestured helplessly. "The trouble is they're all so much the same. Oh, there are differences in detail, I know. Some have more money or less hair; more charm or less muscle; more style or less stamina. But, basically, it's always the same old mixture as before. What one needs is something completely new. You know, I often think . . ."

"And so do I. For the past three weeks I've thought of nothing else."

"You mean that promising poet?"

"Of course. He was something new, if you like."

"He was indeed. As a matter of fact I've been brooding on him pretty steadily myself. In spite of his insufferable behaviour. I can't imagine why."

"Because of his insufferable behaviour, that's why. You soon forget a hot hand, but you never forget a cold shoulder."

"I suppose you're right. I'd give a lot to meet that chap again, just to try and find out what the hell goes on."

Louise stifled another yawn. "And so would I. But we never shall, of course. That's life, my child. The best train is the one you always miss . . ."

She broke off, pointing along the pavement towards the park gate. "My word, that poor fellow looks as if he's been through the mangle."

"Too true. He, clearly, didn't miss the best train. He stopped it."

A cab swerved into the kerb, and the bandaged, crutched figure swung deftly aboard, turning for an instant in profile.

Louise grabbed Rose's arm. "I say! I believe that was him! I mean he."

"What are you gabbling about? Who? I mean whom?"

"Rupert Thorn. I could almost swear . . ."

"Don't be ridiculous. Rupert Thorn is in Italy instructing bare women in the use of the semi-colon. In any case, how could you possibly tell? The chap had his back to us."

Louise frowned and slowly drew on her gloves. "Well, all I can say is it was remarkably like him. Didn't you see him turn his head just as he was climbing in? What's more, I've a pretty shrewd notion he spotted us."

Rose shrugged. "Hæc it your own way. But if it was Rupert Thorn, and if he did recognise us, he wasn't very keen to renew old acquaintance."

"That's just what I'm thinking. And I ask myself why."

At seven o'clock Rupert joined Sophy on the lawn for pre-dinner sherry. He had shed his bandages, plaster cast and crutches. The only traces of his recent mishap were a slight limp and a grazed temple. He was dressed, with his usual careless rapture, in sandals, slacks, a fisherman's jersey and a sumptuous silk neckerchief with pictures of bullfighting all over it. His features were fixed in their customary remote scowl.

"Well?" said Sophy. "Did you have a good day?"

He sank into a chair and sipped his *Tio Pepe*. "Yes and no. I squeezed a trifle out of the Marco

Polo people, but Shamus Skindle was a sore disappointment."

"Oh no! Do you mean to say he didn't like the stuff?"

"He liked it all right. The only trouble is he won't publish it. He says there's a hundred thousand pounds of libel on every page, and he wouldn't touch it with the blunt end of a barge-pole."

"Well, what about the sharp end?"

"There isn't one"

Sophy reared herself up on the cushions. "Very well, then. If Skindle won't play, we'll offer it elsewhere. The University presses would jump at it, I'm sure. Not to mention the Stationery Office (price twenty-five shillings)."

Rupert shook his head. "It's very annoying, I know, but I'm bound to confess that I do rather see Shamus's point of view. Moreover, he's probably quite right when he says that no other firm in the business would touch it either."

"Then we may as well forget about the whole thing at once."

"Indeed no."

"What do you mean?, I'm certainly not going on with the job just for the fun of it. If nobody is prepared to pay me for writing my autobiography . . ."

"Quite so. But it occurs to me that there are several people who would be prepared to pay you for *not* writing it."

"You are suggesting, I take it, a teeny touch of blackmail?"

Rupert winced and made a slow smoothing gesture with his right hand. "I prefer to call it a gentleman's agreement."

There was a long silence punctuated only by the raucous snores of Adolphe. Then Sophy sighed regretfully.

"I'm afraid not, Rupert. Nothing doing."

"But why on earth not? It's the chance of a lifetime. Your old colleagues I be scared stiff if you threatened to publish your memoirs. Believe me, I've weighed the pros and cons very carefully, and I calculate that we could reasonably mulct them for ten thousand pounds; with more to come when we've spent that. Surely you're not indifferent to ten thousand pounds?"

"Far from it. As a matter of fact I'm very badly in need of money indeed. I've sold most of my jewellery, and I have a thumping great overdraft at the bank."

"Here's your opportunity, then."

"No. It can't be done."

"Well, I just don't understand you. Don't tell me you're suffering from moral scruples."

"Good gracious no. They'd all do exactly the same thing themselves if only they had the sense to think of it. No, it's . . . how shall I put it . . . it's a matter of self-esteem. You see, Rupert, back in the good old days, I enjoyed a very high prestige among my playmates. I was set apart upon a pedestal, as it were. The one and only Sophy Cleft, an almost legendary figure. Well, I just can't see myself returning, to the scene of my former triumphs, as a lady in reduced circumstances intent upon blackmailing her former pupils. It wouldn't be dignified. On the other hand, of course . . ."

"Yes?"

"If you would care to undertake the personal contact side of the job, I should be quite agreeable

to lugging in the background and supplying the ammunition."

"Out of the question, alas."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Moral scruples? Or just plain lack of nerve?" t. in

"Don't mock me, re's a. It is simply that I have to consider where my best interests lie. You see, I am Uncle Evelyn's sole heir. When he dies, if ever, I shall come into a tidy little fortune if all goes well. But if I start blackmailing him, he's quite capable of cutting me out of his will and leaving everything to the Unemployed Organ-blowers' Relief Fund, or a home for lady choristers in distress."

"Well, we could forgo your uncle's contribution and concentrate on Rolo Gauder and the others."

"No, Sophy. I'm sure, but it's too chancy. Poetry is a very poorly paid occupation, and I'm not prepared to risk losing my patrimony. Any personal appearance on my part is out."

"Then that seems to be that. What with my self-esteem and your best interests, it looks as if my memoirs are a dead loss after all."

"I'm not so sure. There is an alternative, you know. With a little ingenuity, we could squeeze them anonymously, at long range; thereby safeguarding your prestige and my legacy."

Sophy leaned forward, the precious gems of her eyes sparkling in the evening sunlight. "Now you're talking, Rupert. I think we'd better look into this."

At one a.m. they were drinking tea in the drawing-room in a fog of cigar smoke.

"I think we've covered most of the ground," said Rupert. "But I must confess there's one fundamental point I can't help wondering about. I mean our

victims' reactions. You see, I'm assuming that they will respond to our threats like normal human beings. But, judging by what you tell me, they're a singularly tough and shameless sample. It would be extremely awkward if they decided to fight back and set the police on our trail."

"That's possible, of course," admitted Sophy, "but not very likely from what I know of human nature. Generally speaking there is no one so sensitive to scandal as your reformed town-rake. However, I see your point, and I suggest that before we commit ourselves to criminal action we test their nerves with a few harmless reminders of old times."

"But how will that help us?"

"Human nature again, Rupert. Men and women are above all else creatures of habit, particularly in moments of stress. If our victims are really alarmed, they will do what they always used to do when in a tight corner: rush out of town and take refuge at Ursula Vervain's little bolt-hole in Cornwall, The Lonely Pilchard."

Rupert rubbed his hands. "Good. Then that's what we'll do: a few rounds of harassing fire to test the enemy's morale before we go to fire for effect. One can't be too careful, as I nearly learned to my cost this afternoon."

"Oh? What happened?"

"I almost ran into Louise Gale and Rose Petal in Piccadilly. Fortunately I had already more or less decided to adopt a criminal career, so I took the appropriate evasive action and just managed to skip into a cab before they spotted me. Judging by what we saw on the television last night, those two girls are foot-in-bedsock with most of our principal patients."

## 8

LOUISE was spending the week-end at Monk's Frisking, collaborating with Evelyn Chancery on the next instalment of *Uncle Ned's Pocketbag*.

Now, at five o'clock on Saturday afternoon, they were having tea on the lawn. Evelyn was reclining in a deckchair in the shade of the copper beech. Stylish as always, he was dressed in an elegant suit of tussore tropicals. Louise lay supine on a rubber mattress in the full blaze of the July sun. Practical as always, she was dressed in two ounces of tan lotion. They were totally surrounded by hillocks of stationery, for their recent joint appearance had provoked a record spate of problem-letters.

"I sometimes wonder," said Evelyn, "if this game is worth the candle. For weeks past I've scarcely had a moment to spare for my own affairs. I've had to resign from the village cricket team and the church bellringers' squad; and I haven't held a choir practice since Whitsuntide. The ladies are getting quite peevish."

He sipped his Orange Pekoe and sighed profoundly. "And now, since you've joined the programme, things are worse than ever. In fact your debut has just about doubled the usual torrent of nonsense."

Louise sat up and attacked the plum cake. "I really don't know what you're grumbling about. It's hard work, I agree, but look at the compensations. Think of the wonderful insight you're getting into the workings of human nature. Never a dull moment."

"But that's exactly what I do grumble about," replied Evelyn. "Most of my correspondence is extremely dull. It's amazing how the same old problems keep on cropping up over and over again."

He indicated the mound of letters lying between his feet. "Take this lot, for example, four hundred in all. You might well expect to find some variety in a bundle of this size. Not so, however. Two hundred come from ladies who wish they were going to have babies and aren't, and the other two hundred come from ladies who wish they weren't going to have babies and are. You see what I mean?"

Louise nodded. "There's something in what you say. As a matter of fact I'm finding my own mail a bit monotonous. So far, it seems to be equally divided between rude wives telling me to watch my neckline, and lewd husbands telling me they watch nothing else."

"Exactly what I predicted," said Evelyn. "With my brains and your bust we've got the perfect family programme."

He drank up and pushed the tea-wagon aside. "Well, we'd better get back to work, otherwise we shan't be finished by bedtime. I only hope that the rest of the stuff will prove more exciting. As a confirmed bachelor, I'm getting heartily sick of these petty domestic crises. Every one of them could be settled inside ten seconds with a rousing kick in the seat of the breeches or a smart backhander with the waffle iron."

They settled down to their task. The sun declined, the shadows inched across the grass. The only sound was the rustle of stationery, punctuated by bored yawns, irritated snorts, and the clink of the whisky bottle. Finally, at eight o'clock, Evelyn held up a type-addressed envelope with a gesture of satisfaction.

"And that's that, I'm happy to say. This is the last one. Shall I open it? Or will you?"

"You deal with it. Perhaps it's the exciting one you've been waiting for all day. I'm going for a bath."

She was half-way to the house when she was arrested by a yell of despair. Evelyn was tottering to his feet, staring like one possessed at the letter he had just opened. As she dashed toward him he sank back into his deckchair, blanched and trembling.

"What the hell goes on, ducky? Have you had bad news?"

Evelyn made no reply. He remained huddled in his seat, gaping and twitching. Louise gripped his shoulder and shook him briskly.

"Now, pull yourself together, honey, and tell me what's wrong. Is your tailor creeping up on you at last? Or have the lady choristers got tired of waiting and transferred their affections to organ-blower?"

Wordlessly, Evelyn handed her the sheet of cheap writing paper. It contained a single paragraph of typescript, without either address or signature.

'Dear Uncle Ned, I am suffering the tortures of the damned owing to my Aunt Emily who has taken up permanent residence in the boot-cupboard whence she emerges at irregular intervals to ejaculate: Repent, repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand! I am advised that you have intimate experience of this type of nuisance, and I shall look forward to hearing your solution of my problem in your next programme. P.S. Please include the current price per live hundred-weight of punts-on-a-he-hoof in the Egyptian market.'

Louise read the letter through twice, then shrugged and flicked it aside. "I don't understand what you're worrying about. This is just a lot of nonsense."

Obviously it's been sent in by some m'niac, or a not very funny practical-joker."

Evelyn's voice was a parched whisper. "It's not nonsense. It's true."

"What's true?"

"That I had an Aunt Emily who resided in the boot-cupboard."

"And who emerged at irregular intervals to carry on alarming about the Kingdom of Heaven?"

"Yes."

Louise subsided crosslegged on her rubber mattress. "H'm. I can see there's more in this than meets the eye. What is the significance of the postscript about the price of live aunts on the Egyptian fat-stock market?"

Evelyn hung his head, plucking feebly at the knees of his tussore trousering. Louise leaned forward, raised his chin with her forefinger, and looked him straight in the face.

"Listen, Chancery. There's no point in beating about the bush. You'd far better make a clean breast of the whole business. What precisely *did* you do with your Aunt Emily?"

"I sold her."

"To whom?"

"A Greek currant merchant."

"Where?"

"In The Camel's Hump in Alexandria."

"For how much?"

"Twenty-five pounds, two-and-six."

"Hardly a fair price, surely?"

"I know; but I had to make a quick sale and the exchange was against me."

Ten minutes later Evelyn poured himself a third

double whisky and lit yet another cigarette. "It's no use your pooh-poohing the matter, Louise. I tell you it's extremely serious. The person who wrote this letter knows enough about my private life to run me out of the country. My legal knowledge is limited, but I suspect that selling one's aunt to pay for a second-hand mummy and a crate of hashish may well be a serious criminal offence. Nor is that all. The author also knows that I am Uncle Ned. If either or both of these facts gets out I shall be irretrievably ruined."

He emptied his glass and began to pace back and forth across the grass. "Think of my position. Here am I a Deputy Lieutenant of the County, a Justice of the Peace, and Chairman of the Rural District Council; not to mention Recorder's Warden, Leader of the Men's Bible Study Circle, and village Organist and Choir-master. I shall be compelled to resign all these offices and give up my home and estates. I shan't dare to show my nose in any of my clubs, and the London Library will probably close its doors to me. In addition to which, I shall very likely find myself in gaol."

Louise stood up decisively. "This is sheer fantasy, Evelyn, and I refuse to listen to any more of it. You're letting your imagination run away with you. What you need is a good dinner and a nice long walk; after which you may have regained some sense of reality. Meanwhile I'm going for my bath. Are you coming? Or must I scrub my own back?"

She might have been addressing a deaf-mute. Evelyn had once more collapsed in his deckchair, his face sunk in his hands. She looked down at him for a moment with mingled amusement and exasperation. Then she shrugged and went into the house.

At nine o'clock Louise came downstairs. The servants had been dismissed for the week-end, so she set about organising a cold meal. When all was ready she went into the garden to fetch Evelyn. He was nowhere to be seen ; nor was there any response to her shouts and whistles.

Finally she ran up to his bedroom, only to halt dumbfounded in the doorway. Wardrobes and drawers were agape, clothes and underwear spilling out on to the floor. The dressing-table was cleared of toilet gear. The luggage cupboard was in chaos, an empty suitcase lay on the bed.

She hesitated for a moment, then darted down to the garage. Her own small gadabout was standing in the courtyard. The black Bristol had gone.

After waiting until ten o'clock, she locked up the house and set off on her three-hour drive back to London.

Sir Roland Gander's success as a negotiator was based upon a profound understanding of human nature. Years of experience had taught him that his fellow men were, for the most part, extremely elementary creatures who responded unfailingly to a few elementary stimuli. Consequently, when faced with a deadlock, it was his habit to jettison finesse and 'get down to first principles.' They were three in number : money, women and drink.

This Saturday night he was applying first principles to Tom Brown and Piers Gaveston in a final effort to avert the threatened strike at Domestic Electronics. Since Tom was a millionaire and Piers a union secretary, money was beside the point. Sir Roland therefore, was having recourse to drink and women ; and with complete success.

Standing in the bay-window of his drawing-room

in Chestnut Square, he surveyed the scene before him with satisfaction and distaste. His elegant apartment was a shambles. A dense fog of tobacco smoke and liquor fumes rose to the ceiling. Glasses and bottles littered the tables, playing havoc with veneer and french polish. Cigar and cigarette stubs smouldered on the Chinese carpet and scarred the upholstery. The three-hundred guinea record-player which normally dispensed Bach, Beethoven and Palestrina, was pounding out barrel-house jazz at full blast.

Against this background his guests were diversely employed. The Hon. Prudence Panter was standing in a glassy trance on the Persian hearthrug, patiently holding open her corsage, whilst Tom Brown, poised on one leg on a Hippelwhite chair, emptied the miniature aquarium of tropical fish into the crevasse. Piers Gaveston with his customary smooth aplomb, was helping Mrs. Camberley-Harkaway to be sick into the grand piano.

At one o'clock Sir Roland judged that his methods had achieved their object. He therefore signalled discreetly to the two ladies who presently declared that they must be going. Whilst they were repairing themselves in the spare bedroom, he poured a final drink for Tom and Piers, related his arms around their shoulders, and turned on his most winning smile.

"And now, you two obstinate devils, what have you got to say for yourselves? Are you still determined to go on with this ridiculous dispute? Or are you ready to kiss and be friends?"

Tom Brown belched, and gestured expansively. "It's like this 'ere, Rolo. If he's ready to meet me, I'm ready to meet him. I'm not a pig-headed chap, and never was. Fair dos 'round, and I'm satisfied."

"And you, Piers?"

"I'm perfectly agreeable, Rolo. I see no reason at all why we shouldn't arrive at a reasonable compromise."

Sir Roland turned away, concealing a smile of triumph. "Then that's that. A most satisfactory solution to an unfortunate misunderstanding. I suggest we all meet for luncheon on Monday when we can iron out the details. Agreed? Splendid. And now, I fancy, the ladies are ready and . . . er . . . waiting."

After seeing his guests away, he stood for some moments on the pavement, inhaling the warm night air. He was well pleased with himself. He had handled a ticklish problem with consummate skill. It was another big feather in his cap. Moreover, he had been given to understand that success in this affair would not go unrewarded. There had been hints, unmistakable hints, of something in the next Honours List. A barony, even. . . . Unconsciously he drew himself up and squared his shoulders.

Presently he stamped out his cigar, yawned and stretched. The nervous strain of these last days had been acute. He was ready for a good night's sleep. As he closed the door of his flat, he noticed a letter in the wire cage. He automatically picked it up and carried it into the drawing-room. He poured himself a night-cap, then absent-mindedly slit the envelope.

Louise reached Chestnut Square at one-thirty. Since arriving at an understanding with her employer, she had moved from her quarters in Chelsea and now occupied the flat above his own.

She turned in at once, but in spite of the long drive from Monk's Frisking she was still wide awake. The

night was oppressively warm, and she lay tossing under a single sheet. At last she got out of bed, lit a cigarette and went to the window.

She was surprised to see a beam of light shining from Sir Roland's drawing-room window on to the tree in the Square below. So he had not gone to the country for the week-end after all. There was no sound of voices. There were no cars by the kerb. He must be alone.

She looked up into the summer sky where a handful of stars glimmered through the London haze. A gust of scent from the flowerbeds in the middle of the Square assaulted her nostrils. She swallowed convulsively, and her fingers crisped on the window-sill as the *frisson* pierced her. She turned back into the room, pulled on her wrapper and rummaged feverishly in her handbag for the key he had given her.

The drawing-room door was partly open and the lights were fully on. Louise contemplated the chaos with astonishment and disgust. It seemed that Rolo had taken advantage of her absence to stage a Babylonian orgy. Meanwhile, where was he? In bed, presumably, sunk in a drunken stupor . . . or . . . The notion of his infidelity had scarcely formed in her mind before she was half-way along the corridor to his room, her jaw set and her eyes sparking as she mentally rehearsed her opening burst. c

But the room was empty, the bed untouched. There remained the study. Doubtless he was working late, as usual. She hesitated for a moment, wondering whether to disturb him. With his boundless enthusiasm for hard labour he was quite capable of plunging her into several hours' dictation at two o'clock on a Sunday morning. On the other hand, it was a very long time

until Monday afternoon. Far too long, in view of the warm weather.

She paused at the study door to make tactical adjustments to her wrapper, then softly turned the handle.

A second later her smile of invitation had changed to a grimace of horrified amazement. Sir Roland was seated in his swivel chair, hunched forward over his desk, peering into the muzzle of his service revolver.

"Rolo! Put that thing down!"

"Louise!"

The weapon thudded to the carpet as Sir Roland sagged back in his seat, his hands pressed to his face.

A few moments later Louise was perched on the arm of his chair, cradling his head on her bosom as she held a glass of whisky to his lips.

"You poor darling. It's no use your trying to deceive me. You were going to blast the roof off your attics, and no mistake about it. And just after we've had this room redecorated, too. What seems to be the trouble?"

"I've had a terrible shock, Louise. It completely unhinged me. I didn't know what I was doing. I . . ."

"Well? What is it? Have the rats got into the harmonium? Or has your waistline started to slip?"

Sir Roland took a gulp at his whisky and pointed to the sheet of paper lying on his blotting-pad. At the top of the page was a neatly drawn sketch-map; below this a single paragraph of typescript.

"But what on earth. . . Gelle del Marqués del Duero. . . I don't get it, Rolo. . . his is a plan of the Paralelo area in Barcelona"

"Yes."

"And what does this arrow indicate? Just a moment whilst I read the instructions. . . . 'Dear Sir, At a recent meeting of the Directors of the above establishment, a resolution was unanimously passed regretting your continued absence from the Board and expressing the earnest hope that the Management may, in the near future, once more enjoy the benefit of your wise judgment and unrivalled experience in this branch of the entertainment industry. It was recalled that on the occasion of your last visit you were obliged to leave somewhat hastily. In this connection you may be interested to learn that La Vaca de las Ramblas has now retired from active professional life, following her marriage to an eminent Middle West senator. Her place has been taken by El Azote de la Plaza de Cataluña who, it is felt, will be more cognisant of the respect due to a member of the British Cabinet. Hasta la Vista. Vaya Vd. con Dios.' "

Louise lit a cigarette and examined Sir Roland with a critical eye. Clearly, another of her boy-friends was well-nigh at the end of his tether. And after her recent experience at Monk's Frisking, she was not inclined to treat the matter lightly. She indicated the arrow-head on the sketch-map.

"Listen, Rolo. What is this place?"

"El Hoyo en el Muro. A kind of . . . well, a sort of . . ."

"I see. Plain or fancy?"

"We catered for all tastes; and you could get a smoke as well."

"Oh dear, oh dear. Were you really deep in?"

Sir Roland nodded miserably. "Yes. I invested two thousand pounds in it. He parsed, wringing his hands, then the words came in a rush. "You see, I'd won a

packet at poker-dice off a millionaire bull-breeder, and then I got into a horrible party with some merry-growers which lasted three days and four nights, and when I got myself sorted out I found I'd bought a directorship in this . . . this establishment

"Did it pay?"

"Yes, like I don't know what. Up to the outbreak of the Civil War I was drawing eighteen per cent."

"And then you sold out?"

"No. I retained my holding. But by that time I was getting ahead in business, and breaking into politics, and what with one thing and the next I forgot all about it."

"It seems that somebody else hasn't forgotten all about it."

Sir Roland sprang from his chair and began to pace the carpet in a fever of anxiety.

"This is terrible, terrible. Whoever wrote that letter is in a position to ruin my whole career. Just imagine what would happen if the Opposition got to know about this, or the gutter press, or . . . the P.M. My God, it doesn't bear thinking of. I should be hounded out of office and driven from the country . . ."

He broke off to pour himself another drink, the glassware rattling in his palmed hands like castanets.

"And to think that this should happen now, just at the crowning moment of my life's work."

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I say. This evening I settled that threatened strike at Domes Electronics. A brilliant stroke of negotiation, though I say it myself. And one that won't go unnoticed. I hear from the most reliable sources that I shall be offered a barony in the next Honours List . . . and now this bolt from the

blue which may at any moment lay an axe to the roots of my whole political career, dash the cup from my lips on the very threshold of the goal, and sow the seeds of my ultimate downfall and disgrace."

Louise watched him fondly as he continued his caged cheetah act up and down the room. What a pet he was, to be sure. Even in his present state of alarm and despondency he couldn't help dramatising himself. And that he was very genuinely alarmed there could be no doubt ; for he was a highly educated man and, normally, would sooner mix his drinks than his metaphors.

Suddenly he came to a halt and thumped the desk. " Louise, I can't stand this. I'm at my wits' end. I must go away. I must have a few days' absolute peace and quiet to think this thing out and decide what is to be done."

" Well, of course, if you feel like that about it . . . "

" I do. You must cancel all my engagements for next week, and block all enquiries as to my whereabouts. Thank God the House is in recess, and that strike called off. At least I can allow myself a short breathing space."

" But where are you going ? You can't go abroad because that's full of the Opposition Front Bench on free sprees, which would make you look very inferior on your niggardly travel allowance."

Sir Roland frowned and plucked at his nether lip. " Now I wonder . . . I wonder if old Ursula Vervain still keeps that little place down in Cornwall. That would be just the spot to find complete privacy and relaxation."

" And who is Ursula Vervain ? "

" Quite a character. I haven't heard of her for

years, but in the old days she was a great comfort to us all. She ran this wonderfully convenient little pub-inn on the Cornish Riviera, and whenever any of us found it desirable to retire from public life for a while, we used to slip down there for a few weeks."

"Why not ring up right away and find out?"

"Impossible. Ursula would never countenance a telephone. She catered for a clientèle who wanted complete freedom from all outside worries, and a chance to . . . well . . ."

"To lie low for a bit until things had blown over?"

"If you like to put it that way, yes."

"Then the only thing for us to do is drive down there and find out."

"Did you say *us*, Louise?"

"Certainly. You don't think I'm going to let you go off alone in your present condition?"

"That's very sweet of you, my dear. But I don't want to spoil your week-end. I should love your company, of course, but I assure you I shall be quite all right alone."

"Possibly so," said Louise making for the door, "but I shan't. When do we start?"

"At once, if you can manage it. The sooner the better."

"But won't you need some sleep first?"

"Sleep!" cried Sir Roland bitterly. "Sleep! With this Damoclean sword hanging over my head I feel as if I shall never sleep again."

"Very well, then. I'll pack a bag straight away and be ready to start in half an hour. I suggest we use the Ro-Ro, then we can take turn at snoozing in the back."

She stopped at the door, came back and patted his cheek.

"Cheer up, my sweet. You're not the only one."

"Not the only what, Louise?"

"Not the only popular idol with feet of clay . . . and pretty-smelly ones, too."

SPEECH DAY at St. Goneril's was one of the chief events of the London season, ranking with the Eton and Harrow match, Ascot, Cowes, and Mr. Ambrose Bannister's annual garden party at Fidget Between. This year it was a particularly happy occasion for it marked the first anniversary of Miss Minnie Blazer's appointment as Directress of Studies.

By three o'clock the girls, their relatives and friends were massed in deckchairs on the main lawn. Facing them, at the foot of the terrace steps, were the Board of Governors and the Staff, with Minnie in the middle, a notable figure in a purple tea-gown and a mortar-board. To her left was the Bishop of Elmbury, Chairman of the Governors; to her right the guest of honour, Lord Grapple, now in his ninetieth year and visibly decomposing under the July sun. It was his task to give away the prizes; and this year they were well worth winning, for Minnie had firmly vetoed the usual dreary trophies.

"Books!" she had observed at the last Governors' meeting. "Books! Ridiculous! My girls are training to be polished femmes du monde, not a lot of scruffy intellectuals. We'll give them something civilised." Accordingly, the prize table was stacked with handbags, powder-boxes, cocktail-shakers, cigarette-cases, shooting-sticks, and gift-vouchers for stockings and underwear.

The ceremony began with a rather shambolic rendering of the school song, *A Hail to St. Goneril*,

composed by that notable town-rake Giles Selvage. The four line refrain which followed each stanza was marked by a particular lack of enthusiasm.

- (ff) Clean in heart and (pp) pure in thought,
- (f) Counting worldly joys as nought,
- (fff) To Thee we dedicate our lives,
- (pp) Duteous daughters (ppp) faithful wives.

Then the Bishop rose to make the opening speech. In this he was somewhat hampered by the din of revelry coming from the marquee reserved for the Venerable Company of Bombardiers, where the officers of the regiment, headed by Vivian (now Major) Handspike, were working havoc with the champagne and waitresses. Nonetheless, he was able to give his audience a glowing account of the progress of St. Goneril's during the past twelve months under the wise guidance and enthusiastic leadership of Miss Blazer.

This done, he called upon the Directress of Studies to give her annual report. Minnie topped up a tumbler from the water carafe, which was full of gin, and assembled her papers. But before she had opened her mouth she was interrupted by one of the servants who crossed the lawn with a telegram.

Murmuring her apologies, Minnie ripped the envelope and scanned the contents; whereupon she recoiled so sharply that she only saved herself from falling flat on her back by snatching at the Bishop's pectoral cross with her left hand and Lord Grapple's auburn wig with her right.

There was a gasp of alarm from the audience, but Minnie instantly pulled herself together. In a few suave phrases she expressed her regret that she was temporarily called away on urgent business, and

requested Lord Grapple to proceed at once with the distribution of the prizes. Then she walked firmly across the lawn to the house. The only trace of her recent agitation was Lord Grapple's wig still dangling from her right hand.

But Rose Petal, in the front row, was filled with curiosity. Only once before had she seen Minnie so badly shaken : when it was discovered that several of the girls were committing the appalling social blunder of wearing nylon stockings instead of silk. As soon as the prize-giving was under way she slipped out of her seat and sidled into the house.

She made straight for Minnie's private sitting-room. A subdued snarl answered her knock.

"Who's there? What's it?"

"Rose. I've come to see if you're all right."

Minnie was standing in the middle of the room, alternately gulping at a tremendous brandy and dragging feverishly at a cigarette. Gone were the familiar brassy aplomb and smooth effrontery. The Directress of Studies was coming apart at the seams.

Rose perched herself on the sofa. "I gather that telegram made pretty poor reading. What's the trouble now? Nylon stockings again? Or has someone been detected wearing elastic in her knicker legs?"

Minnie mutely handed over the buff form.

'Congratulations on first anniversary at St. Goneril's and best wishes for future success. From your old students at N.I.5.'

Rose looked up bewildered. "I don't get this at all. What is N.I.5? Is it a misprint or M.I.5? Don't tell me you were in the Secret Service."

"It means National Institution."

"And what's that?"

"Me."

"You?"

"Yes. The Houses of Parliament, Westminster Abbey, the Tower of London, the Zoo, and me. I was a kind of annexe to the Foreign Office."

Rose closed her eyes and pressed her fists to her forehead. "I'm sorry if I'm being dense, but I haven't quite grasped the thread . . ."

Minnie emptied her glass and hastily refilled it. "It was long before your time, back in the twenties when Felix Pocket was Foreign Secretary. There was a lot of nonsense going on in the Middle East, so Felix decided to invite the local potentates over in alphabetical order and sweeten them up. The usual treatment: guards of honour, official banquets, reviews of the forces, and visits to famous national institutions. That was where I came in."

"Yes?"

"Yes. The boys at the F.O. were trying their best, but they didn't seem to be getting the answers. Reports showed that the blackamoors were unimpressed by the British way of life. In fact they were so damn bored that they could hardly wait to get back to their normal routine of military coups d'état and palace revolutions. Felix came to me for advice, as he always did when his plans began to sag. I vetted his programme and soon told him what was missing."

Minnie gestured dramatically. "What these boys are pining for, I said, is a few home comforts. Felix saw my point at once. But the question was, who could manage the job? As I pointed out, the essence of a good programme is a strong start and an even stronger finish. And as this programme began with the Royal Navy . . ."

Rose nodded understandingly. "So you took it on?"

"I did. And very rewarding it was, too. The knowledge that, in my own small way, I was doing something to help my country; not to mention a number of very handsome presents. One chap gave me an oilfield. Unfortunately he was assassinated as soon as he got home, so after that I always insisted upon diamonds."

Rose blew a reflective smoke-ring. "National Institution 5! I congratulate you. A truly patriotic gesture . . . but scarcely in keeping with your present position. No wonder that telegram split your weldings."

Minnie nodded bitterly. "Exactly. Whoever sent it knows enough to ruin my whole career. If the facts about N.I.5 get out I shall be sacked from St. Goneril's instantly, and all my hopes of future advancement wiped out at a single stroke."

"Future advancement? Don't tell me you're thinking of leaving St. Goneril's?"

Minnie shrugged and crushed out her cigarette. "As I've told you so much, I suppose I may as well tell you the rest. I am thinking of leaving St. Goneril's. Or I was, until the thing came out of the blue. I've been offered the Ministry of Education."

"What!"

"Yes. Just that. I had an interview with you-know-whom last week. It seems that old Selwyn Folly is on his last legs and they've fully persuaded him to retire from public life. That means a by-election, and I'm to put up for the Government. It's an absolutely safe seat, and as soon as I'm re-elected I'm to get the Ministry of Education. It'll employ a lot of people, of course. But the Government see that national

education has been slipping badly these last years, and they need a skilled administrator with drive and imagination to reorganise the whole thing from top to bottom."

There was a long silence. Then, suddenly, Minnie snatched up the telegram and glowered at it furiously.

"And now this! Just when my whole life's work is coming to fruition. It's damnable, I tell you, utterly damnable. It doesn't bear thinking of."

Rose joined her in the bay-window and patted her on the shoulder. "You really mustn't let your imagination run away with you like this. It's probably just a silly practical joke."

Minnie turned away impatiently. "It's no use trying to make light of the matter, Rose. We must look the facts in the face. Somebody has got to know about N.I.5; and with that hanging over my head I shall never have a moment's peace. Something must be done."

"But what can you do?"

"I don't know. I wish to God I did . . .

From the window they saw the company rise and scatter towards the marquees as the prize-giving came to an end.

"Well, there's no time to go into the matter now," said Rose. "You ought to be getting out there and mingling with your guests; otherwise you'll have the Board of Governors stopping in to see what's happened to you."

"The Board of Governors can go and get stuffed. I've more important things on my mind at the moment than making small-talk to a lot of half-bred nincompoops. You can go to Theo. Crozier and tell him . . . oh, anything. Well, now I've got a migraine and that I've had to go to bed. What I need is a bit of peace

and quiet so that I can make up my mind what to do about this telegram."

Rose saw that there was no point in arguing. The Directress of Studies was a badly disorganised woman, and nothing would persuade her to entertain her guests.

"Very well, then. I'll go and make your excuses. In the meantime I advise you to try and relax a bit, and stop panicking. You can leave everything to me for the rest of the afternoon. As soon as I've got them feeding I'll nip back and see how you're getting on."

In fact, it was not until three hours later that Rose got back to the house, for she was speedily involved in a desperate orgy in the Venerable Company of Bombardiers' marquee which only concluded at seven o'clock when the tent was burned to the ground.

Having seen the last of the guests off the premises she ran along to Miss Blazer's room. It was empty. During the next fifteen minutes she combed the entire house and grounds. Of the Directress of Studies there was no trace. It was not until she went to her own quarters to bathe and change that she found the answer: a letter lying on her writing-table.

'Dear Rose, I have gone away for a few days' solitude to decide what to do about the problem we were discussing this afternoon. You can say that I have been ordered by my doctor to take a short rest in the country. I know that I can rely upon you to manage everything in my absence. Sincerely, Minnie Blazer.'

Half an hour later, in the middle of dinner, Rose was called to the telephone. It was General Grubmit.

"Splasher, darling! I thought you'd forgotten all

about me. Why weren't you at the prize-giving this afternoon?"

"Too busy, my pet. Arse-over-tip settling into my new job."

"What new job?"

"Haven't you heard? They've put me in charge of the new School of Interplanetary Warfare. I feel like a dachshund with six legs."

"Clever boy. But I'd have preferred the Pay Corps. More pickings . . ."

"And I'm giving an impromptu School-warming party to-night and I want you to come."

"Of course, I'd love to. Where is it?"

"Here, at my place at Nun's Veiling."

"But I thought you said it was at the School of Whatever."

"Quite so, my love. All the same thing. Rather a neat move on my part. They wanted accommodation adjacent to Druid's Plain so I letted them my country house. Just the job. I live and work in my own home and draw a thumping great rent from the War Department. What's more, I'm getting out extensive plans for modernising the ~~property~~ and improving the grounds, all at the taxpayers' expense. But I'll tell you everything when I see you. How soon can you get down? The serious drinking will begin about ten o'clock I imagine."

"I'll leave right away. I've got the new Aston-Martin, so I shan't be a jiffy."

"Splendid. Oh, and by the way, there's a lot of bloody silly security nonsense going on down here now. Sentries and electrified fences and all the box of tricks. So you'd better have to-night's pass-word, or they'll never let you in."

"How ever so exciting. Just a minute whilst I write it down."

"The challenge is : Si la jeunesse savait. And the reply is : Si la vieillesse pouvait."

"My word, that's a bit long-haired, isn't it ?"

"Possibly so. But this damn place is stiff with scientific types, and I'm determined to civilise the brutes. Whilst I command the School of Interplanetary Warfare we're going to have some culture with our astro-physics."

Two and a half hours later Rose reached Nun's Veiling and drew up at the main gates. Her car was immediately surrounded by burly sentries with automatic weapons at the ready. She stated her business and an intellectual-looking sergeant was called from the guard-room.

"Si la jeunesse savait," he observed in a perfect French accent.

"Si la vieillesse pouvait," replied Rose in a perfect English accent.

"O.K.," said the Sergeant. "Let her through."

Then he leaned in through the driver's window, scrutinising Rose with keen appreciation.

"H'm. H'm. Youth obviously *does* know." He jerked a thumb towards the house. "I hope for your sake, Miss, that age *can*."

When Rose arrived a really first-class party was raging all over the house. Some very rowdy dancing was going on in the drawing-room. The hall was given over to various games of chance including Snakes-and-Ladders, Crown-and-Anchors, Hookey-Housey, and Snap. A bicycle race was in progress on the upstairs corridors, and a great many people were sliding down the banisters. For those of a more studious temper

there was the library where, in addition to the books, newspapers and periodicals, a comprehensive selection of the School's secret files was available for inspection.

General Grummit kissed Rose tenderly on the lips with both hands full. "My little rosebud. So glad you could come. It's a truly tremendous party. We've got all the world and his mistress here and no house barred."

"So I notice. But I do think you might have invited Vivian Handspike, seeing as 'ow I'm engaged to the chap. I telephoned him before I started and asked him to come with me, but the poor devil is on duty and couldn't make it."

"I know. I fixed that with his C.O. this morning."

"Splasher, how wonderful you are. You think of everything."

"On the contrary, my love. I think of only one thing. But I think of that all the time. And now come and meet everybody. You'll find it's mostly Warfare and the Arts. They go so well together."

"Do they?"

"But of course. All the men of action want to be artists, and all the artists want to be men of action. So when you bring them together they're immensely flattered and fawn on one another like famished spaniels. By the way, I ought to warn you that I've had to invite a few of the scientists from the tutorial staff. But you can easily spot them: provincial university accents and scurf on the collar. Anyhow, I've no doubt they're all in the billiard-room listening to Bach. What would you like to start with?"

"Have you got a Field Marshal?"

"Certainly. There's one in the corner over there, tweaking Nancy Bunting's bottom with the fire tongs."

They crossed the hall and intervened, whereupon the great man laid aside his weapon and smiled on them fondly.

"Capital party, Splasher. Haven't enjoyed myself so much for years. I can see you're going to make a great success of this School of Inter-ridiculous Warfare. My word, that's a rooting little doxy you've got there."

"Rose Petal, sir. Very keen to meet a Field Marshal. I understand she wants to look for the baton in your knapsack."

At two-thirty Rose was seated at the General's dressing-table, smearing her face with cold cream. Through the open doorway of the adjacent bathroom came gusts of cigar smoke and the crackle of *The Times*.

Rose was just on the point of getting into bed when she was arrested by a terrible cry and the sound of frantic splashing. She rushed through the doorway to find General Gruenmit sprawled on his stomach across the edge of his tub, the newspaper still clutched in his hands.

"Whatever is the matter with you, honey? Have you backed on to a giant? Sting-ray? Or are you just saying your prayers?"

"I've had a terrible shock, Rose. Really appalling. Fairly knocked the stuffing out of me . . ."

"So it seems. Here, let me give you a hand. Then you can tell me all about it."

She helped him to his feet, rough-dried him with a warm towel and led him in to the bedroom. There he collapsed into the armchair, a pitiable sight indeed.

"Now, what's the trouble?"

"There! In the Personal Column. Half-way down. . . . God, it's too awful!"

"The Personal Column, you say? Let's have a look. . . . Well, how very extraordinary. . . . 'SPLASHER. Something tells me that you need me. Old soldiers never die. Standing by for orders. Bubub.'"

A little later, the General, supported by a terrific whisky, was mumbling his story.

"It was back in the twenties when I was a Troop Commander in the Field gunners. I was madly in love with the wife of a French mineral-water magnate. Tremendous creature, she was, all domes and cupolas and covered with kohl and *Echo Troublant*."

"Blonde or brune?" inquired Rose curiously.

"It varied a good deal. Sometimes she was bright green."

"And did she love you too?"

"Insanely. Used to play little tunes on my spine with a pair of xylophone hammers. The Marseillaise and *Auprès de ma Blonde* and . . ."

"All right. Go on."

"Well, during the summer of our passion she managed to dump the spouse at Montecatini for the liver treatment and nipped over to England for a fortnight. Of course you can guess what happened. The regiment was sent down to Dryid's Plain for firing practice."

"Oh, I say, bad luck! What did you do about it?"

"The silly think I could do! Sent my batman on leave and took her instead."

There was a thoughtful pause.

"Just like *divian* and me! No wonder you spotted my disguise so smartly."

"Yes. Just the same. But our outing lasted a solid fortnight."

"And did you get away with it?"

"Of course we did. Otherwise I shouldn't be here now. Not that it looks as if I'm going to be here much longer . . ."

General Grummit raked his fingers through his hair and stared desperately at the carpet.

"What do you mean you won't be here much longer? I entirely fail to see what you're getting so worked up about. I think it's ever so funny."

He sprang to his feet and pointed an agued forefinger at the newspaper. "For pity's sake, Rose, have a bit of sense. This is no laughing matter. Don't you realise the significance of that damn message? The person who inserted it knows enough about my past life to have me courtmartialled and dismissed the service with ignominy."

He raised his clenched fist towards the ceiling and then cringed down again in his armchair.

"That this should happen now! Just when I've reached the top rung of the ladder and landed the job that every officer in the British Army would give his right hand for. It's horrible, I tell you. Absolutely shattering. I could slit my throat from tab to tab."

"Steady, Grummit. Pull yourself together. It's probably just a silly practical joke."

"A joke, indeed! It may be a joke for somebody, but it could mean the end of everything for me. Something will have to be done about this, Rose. And pretty smartly, too."

"But what can you do?"

"I don't know. But I shall have to think of something. I shall have to think . . ."

Half an hour later General Grummit had made up his mind.

"It's no use, Rose. I shall have to shelve everything

else until I've got this business straightened out. I can't attend to anything with this hanging over me. I'm going to take a week's leave and get away from it all. Given a few days' peace and quiet, I can probably decide what course to take. The School doesn't open officially until Monday week, and Tidworth-Pennings can handle anything that crops up."

"But where are you going? You can't possibly go abroad because everyone will say you're off to Moscow with the School's secret files."

Suddenly the General snapped his fingers. "I have it! The very place. Ursula Vervain's little pub-inn down in Cornwall. Where we always used to go in the old days when things got overheated."

He rushed from the room and returned with a couple of suitcases.

"Do you mind helping me to pack, darling? You know where everything is."

"You mean we're moving off this very instant? Without any sleep?"

He dropped the suitcases and whirled around. "Did you say *we*, Rose? You're coming with me?"

"Certainly, my sweet. I wouldn't dream of letting you go off alone in your present condition. The sight of you groaning and rattling in your little birthday suit has inflamed my maternal instincts."

In due course they packed into the Aston-Martin, checked out at the main gates, and headed south-west.

"And to think," mused Rose, "that we owe all this to a girl called Buu."

## 10

It was six a.m. when Louise and Sir Rolānd reached The Lonely Pilchard, a grey stone building tucked in at the head of a grassy valley. Half a mile away the cliffs dipped down to a tiny bay edged with boulders and oil-clogged sand. Beyond, the English Channel gleamed frigidly in the insipid sunlight.

As they approached along a jagged track between high banks, Sir Rolānd pointed to a plume of chimney smoke.

"Well, somebody still lives here, anyway. I only hope it's Ursula. . . . And look, there's the sea!"

In spite of his fatigue he made a sweeping gesture and quoted appropriately from Xenophon.

"Too damn cold," muttered Louise from the back seat, knuckling the sleep out of her eyes. "Give me the Meddy every time. I like my water civilised."

The car had scarcely stopped when a tall slim lady lounged out of the house, with the slightly raffish elegance of a thoroughbred race-horse. She wore a white silk shirt and denim slacks; her closely cropped hair was outrageously hennaed; an abundance of lipstick and mascara was littered about her patrician features.

Sir Rolānd sprang from the car and grasped her by both hands. "My dear Ursula! This is indeed a sight for sore eyes. I was so much afraid we might not find you here after all these long, long years."

"Delighted to see you, Rolo. I was beginning to think you weren't coming."

"You mean you were expecting me?"

"Well, when the others starting pouring in I had a feeling you might be along fairly soon."

"The others? What others?"

"Why, all the old happy family; or most of it. Minnie Blazer arrived at ten o'clock last night, followed by Evelyn Chancery. Then, at four this morning Splasher Grummit swept in, accompanied by the most delicious little bit of nonsense with red curls. An hour later it was Theo. Crozier on the wickedest stripped down Ferrari you ever saw; scarcely a suitable carriage for an Anglican Bishop, I must say. And now you and Miss . . ."

"Louise Gale, my private secretary."

"I congratulate you. Your taste, I notice, is still for the pneumatic. If those are genuine, which seems almost too much to believe, they're a credit to you both."

Ursula led them into a stone-floored kitchen where a tremendous fire was roaring away in an old-fashioned range. She took an enamelled tea-pot from the hob and poured out a vicious brew.

"Upon my soul, Rolo, this is quite like old times. I'm just trying to remember when you last took refuge here. Unless my memory fails me it was way back in thirty-five, when that horrible 'great Baptist minister was chasing you round the country with a horse-whip . . ."

"Quite so, Ursula," interrupted Sir Roland firmly. "But it's current events I'm interested in at the moment. What goes on? What are the others doing here?"

"I haven't a notion. I only know that they all

seemed uncommonly rattled and tottered into bed the moment they arrived. In any case, you remember the rules of this establishment : no questions asked and none answered."

"Er . . . yes, to be sure. I apologise."

Ursula perched herself on the table and fondly pinched his cheek. "I'm so glad you didn't fail us, Rolo. This is going to be a really joyful week-end. The only one missing now is Ambrose Bannister ; apart, of course, from Sophy Gleft."

Sir Roland nodded and sighed. "Ah yes ; the incomparable Sophy, the nonpareil of gallant ladies. What style, what panache, what stamina ! They don't breed 'em like that any more."

"I suppose you never heard anything of her after she took off to Borneo ? She never sent me so much as a rude postcard."

"Not the faintest whisper. She vanished completely. Evelyn Chancery will have something to answer for at the day of judgment."

"So that was the reason ? I often wondered."

"Yes ; not that she ever admitted it. Her story was that she was going to Borneo because she'd heard that the Wild Man thereof had a vacancy for a wild woman. But I happen to know that she was quite crazy about Evelyn and proposed to him no less than six times. When he finally turned her down she did the dignified thing and went native."

"I must say I find it hard to understand his attitude. Why, the roaring boys of five continents were down on their knees to Sophy."

"Too true. But Evelyn, you must remember, always suffered from conscientious scruples. He took the line that it wouldn't be fair to marry Sophy, because on

her income she would never be able to support him in the style to which he was accustomed."

"They were interrupted by a resounding snore. Louise was lying back in her chair sound asleep.

Urula stood up. "Your secretary seems to have passed out; Rolo. You must take more care of her. The present generation are a sickly lot I often think. Pampered and spoon-fed by the welfare state, they haven't the guts and gristle of we old free enterprisers. You'll find everything ready in your usual room, including your favourite double loose-box."

At three o'clock the next afternoon an earnest conference was in progress on the seaward verandah of The Lonely Pilchard. Evelyn Chancery, Splasher Grummit, Minnie Blazer and Theo. Crozier were leaning forward in their chairs, listening attentively to Sir Roland Gander. Rose and Louise, lying on cushions on the lawn, were watching the proceedings with keen interest.

"When you see them in the mass," mused Rose, "they're an impressive sample, and no mistake about it. What beats me is their wonderful state of preservation. Every one of them must be verging on sixty, yet they've more vitality and all-round performance than the average thirty-year-old."

"You're quite right," agreed Louise. "And when you think of what they've packed into their lives it's even more astounding. Sixty years of glorious rampage with nary a pause for breath: scampering round the four quarters of the globe, vaulting from bed to bed, drinking, gambling, dodging the bailiffs, and generally tearing it apart. Yet here they are with all their own hair and teeth and not a varicose vein between them. I wish I knew the secret."

"Well, for one thing, they've had the sense to stay single. There's nothing like family life for hardening the arteries and softening the gums."

"True. And what's equally important, they've all kept their wits about them. I always thought these professional town-rakes were a lot of barbarians, but Rolo and Evelyn, at any rate, are a pair of unabashed intellectuals. High thinking off-seis low living. The late Beethoven quartets are a sovereign antidote to fornication; a regular perusal of the novels of Stendhal works wonders for the kidneys."

"I know. All this culture takes some living up to. Splasher Grummit was quite put out when I said I would sooner have a bottle of *Sueur d'Extase* than the complete works of Dante as a token of his affection and esteem."

"I suppose," said Louise, "it's really a matter of your point of view. Some see life as a vale of tears; others see it as a humdrum routine to be shuffled through as best one may. But that lot over there have clearly found it an uproarious farce with themselves cast in the principal roles. Hence their dewy eyes, cast-iron digestions and deathless energy."

"I don't see much sign of uproarious farce at the moment," said Rose. "There's no doubt they've been properly shaken by this hail of reminiscences. I suggest we join the conference and give them the benefit of our encouragement and advice."

Sir Roland was sounding off in his best ministerial style.

"There's no use beating about the bush. We must look the situation squarely in the face and decide what is to be done. The facts are simple. During the past twenty-four hours each of us has received an anony-

mous communication referring to an unfortunate episode in his or her past life. We have all been deeply disturbed and understandably so. Occupying, as we do, positions of high responsibility and esteem, we cannot take such an incident lightly.

"On the other hand there is no reason, as I see it, for panic and hysteria. I have devoted much careful thought to the matter, and I have come to the conclusion that we are the victims of a crude practical joke. Normally, of course, the best way of dealing with this kind of cheap tomfoolery is to ignore it completely. Unfortunately, however, we cannot afford to do this. The general public is only too ready to snap up scandalous rumours about eminent people; and we all know how quickly rumour spreads. A tasteless jest of this kind, unless promptly nipped in the bud, can easily develop into a national sensation, bringing all kinds of deplorable consequences in its train. I suggest, therefore, that we must lose no time in tracing this affair to its source and dealing with it firmly and finally."

"Too bloody true, Rolo," snapped Miss Blazer. "But how are we going to find out who is responsible? If I could get my hands on the . . ."

"Quite, Minnie, quite, I know how you feel. But there is nothing to be gained by losing our tempers. This problem must be handled in a calm and orderly manner. I have already come to certain conclusions which you may be interested to hear."

"Press on, Rolo," urged General Grummit. "If you've any ideas let's have 'em. Personally, I'm clueless."

"Very well. One thing strikes me most forcibly about all these messages. The person who sent them must have a very intimate knowledge of our past lives.

Many of our escapades, of course, were widely renowned ; but these particular incidents most certainly were not. They were known only amongst our own select circle."

The Bishop of Elmbury jerked upright in his chair. "Are you suggesting, Rolo, that the author of these messages is one of the old circus?"

"I am."

"But that's outrageous," protested Evelyn Chancery. "Damn it all, man, dog doesn't eat dog. No, no. You can take it from me, this is the work of some underbred type who's picked up a few hints from somewhere and . . ."

Sir Roland held up his hand. "I can't agree with you, Evelyn. I allow that even the best kept secrets are apt to leak. An outsider might possibly have heard about these incidents in broad outline. But no outsider could have got hold of so much detail. That is the point: the astonishing and alarming accuracy of detail. You admitted it yourself earlier on; and I can vouch for it in my own case."

"Me, too," said the Bishop. "There were several colourful touches in my letter that I'd forgotten about myself until I was reminded of them."

"Then you agree with my theory that the guilty party is one of our old associates?"

There was an unpleasant silence. The company shifted uneasily in their seats, glancing covertly at one another out of the corner of their eyes.

Sir Roland permitted himself a wistful smile. "Come, come. It's not as bad as that. In view of the frank admissions we've all made, I don't think there's any cause to suspect present company."

"Then whom do you suspect?" demanded Minnie

Blazer. "If you ask me, it's about time we stopped talking in riddles and got down to brass tacks."

"I suggest a simple process of elimination," replied Sir Roland. "We are agreed that the guilty party must be one of the old circle. Well . . . who is missing?"

"Good God!" cried General Grunamit. "Ambrose Bannister! But, Rolo, you can't possibly think that old Ambrose. . . . I mean to say . . ."

Sir Roland shrugged. "We have sifted the evidence. We must draw the necessary conclusions, however distasteful."

The Bishop plucked feverishly at his apron. "It's hardly believable, I must say; but I always did think Ambrose was a bit too smooth. That hobby of his was vastly amusing, of course; but scarcely the pastime of a gentleman."

"Quite so," said Evelyn Chancery. "I don't pretend that I was exactly an angel myself in the good old days, but there *are* limits. After all, I was compelled to dispose of Aunt Emily to discharge debts of honour; but Ambrose went around collecting knickers just to show off his legerdemain. If he'd been short of money and sold the things second-hand there might have been some excuse. But he just gave them away as keepsakes to all his friends."

"Exactly," snarled Minnie. "And he hadn't even the decency to keep a proper record. In thirty-six, I remember, he whipped mine at Ascot on Gold Cup day, and then gave them back to me three weeks later as a birthday present."

Sir Roland drew himself up and folded his arms on his chest. "I'm glad that you all now seem ready to face the facts. It is upsetting, I know, to find an old

colleague guilty of a cold-blooded treachery. But such, alas, is human nature. One thing is certain. We cannot afford to let sentiment enter into this matter. Ambrose Bannister has chosen to play a very dirty game. He has placed us all in an extremely hazardous position, jeopardising our careers and laying us open to public obloquy and disgrace. We must deal with him, promptly and ruthlessly. Fortunately we are all people of considerable influence. It should not be difficult to find ways and means of putting Ambrose in his place and keeping him there. No one could regret it's necessity more than I ; but people in our position must accept their responsibilities. Ambrose, I repeat, must be dealt with. We owe it not only to ourselves, but to the country at large."

As Sir Roland sat down, Ursula appeared at the french windows. "Glad tidings, one and all. You'll be delighted to hear that we are now complete. Ambrose Bannister has just arrived ; in a shocking state, poor fellow. Vibrating like a tuning-fork and squirting brandy at every pore. It seems he's just received a nasty, anonymous letter."

Somewhat later Louise, Sir Roland and Evelyn Chancery were walking along the cliffs.

"I've brought you two up here," declared Louise, "to try and knock some sense into your heads about this business. The others can do what they like, but you are my special pets and I'm determined to try and help you."

"That's very sweet of you," said Evelyn "but I really don't see what you can do . . . beyond giving us a crust and a night's shelter when we've been hounded into the gutter."

"I can use my brains, which is something that neither of you seems able to do."

"What are you getting at, Louise?" enquired Sir Roland curtly. "I suppose you're going to tell us that you know who sent those messages?"

"Exactly. Or, rather, I have a pretty strong suspicion who sent them. Your old playmate, Sophy Cleft."

"What! But that's fantastic! Sophy Cleft hasn't been heard of for over twenty years."

"Dead and buried long ago," agreed Evelyn. "You'll have to think again, my child."

"I've heard all that several times before," replied Louise tartly. "But I don't believe it. I'm perfectly certain, as I've told you both already, that Sophy Cleft was at Bellagio last June. The woman I saw that night on the hotel terrace was the absolute spit image of the photograph in Rolo's drawing-room. I'm convinced of it, I tell you, and nothing you can say will budge me."

Louise spoke with such force that her companions halted and stared at her in astonishment.

"I suppose it is just possible," said Sir Roland at last. "After all, we have no firm evidence that Sophy is dead. The thing is well-nigh incredible; but when one considers that detail, all that damnably accurate detail . . ."

Evelyn sank his chin on his bosom. "But this is a dreadful prospect, absolutely appalling. And if it is Sophy, how do we get to grips with her? We've no clues, no contacts at all."

"I rather think we have a contact," replied Louise. "Your nephew, Rupert."

Evelyn vented a yelp of terror. "No, no! Not

that ! You're not suggesting that those two, of all people, have gone into partnership ? I tell you it would spell the breakdown of Western civilisation."

"I admit I've no proof," said Louise. "In fact it's just a hunch at the moment. But in our present situation we can't afford to overlook any possibility."

"I'd give anything to overlook this one," muttered Evelyn.

Sir Roland tapped Louise on the shoulder. "I think, my dear, that you had better tell us all you suspect."

"All right. It sounds a bit thin, I'm afraid, but these are the facts. First : there was this character at Bellagio whom I'm sure was your Sophy Cleft. Second : Rupert Thorn was also at Bellagio acting as host for the Marco Polo travel agency. Third : the last night I was there I saw him join her at her table on the hotel terrace. Whether anything was developing I can't guess, as I had an appointment elsewhere at the time. But they had certainly established contact."

"If Sophy Cleft and my nephew Rupert established contact," said Evelyn, "all hell would develop, and pretty smartish. Go on."

"The scene now shifts to London. Last Thursday Rose and I had luncheon with Tom Brown and Piers Gaveston at the Ritz. Whilst we were chatting on the pavement afterwards, we saw a young man come out of the Green Park and get into a cab. He was on crutches and all done up in bandages, but I'm certain it was Rupert. What's more I'm sure he saw us and deliberately avoided us, which strikes me as highly significant."

"Why so significant ?" demanded Sir Roland.

"It's just intuition, but I see it this way. Rupert

Thorn and Sophy Cleft are jointly responsible for these anonymous letters. If they read the newspapers and watch the newsreels they must know that Rose and I are closely connected with some of their principal victims. Hence Rupert's speedy disappearance when he saw us outside the Ritz."

Sir Roland lashed out savagely at a patch of thistles with his walking-stick. "I don't know what to think, I really don't. This is all pure guess-work. On the other hand we've nothing else to go on, nothing at all."

He decapitated another clump of thistles, then jabbed his stick into the turf. "I don't know how you feel about it, Evelyn, but I'm inclined to think that we ought to follow this up. I still find it almost impossible to believe that Sophy can be back in circulation, but we can't afford to ignore any clue however slight."

"I agree with you, Ro'lo. But, assuming that it is Sophy and Rupert, how do we get at them? It'll be like looking for a couple of black nambas in the Black Hole of Calcutta. We could hire a private detective, I suppose. Or you could use your influence with the police."

"Don't be such a bloody fool, Evelyn," rasped Sir Roland. "It would be courting disaster to call in outside help. We shall have to handle this thing ourselves, and damn carefully, too."

"You'd far better leave it to me," said Louise quietly.

"Leave it to you? My dear girl! It's very sweet of you to suggest it, of course; but there's no reason why you should get mixed up in it."

"There are at least three good reasons why I should. I'm very fond of you both and I don't propose to watch you being pushed around; I have already decided

upon a possible line of investigation ; and I have an old score to settle with Rupert Thorn."

"But how are you going to set about it?" insisted Evelyn.

"The first thing I'm going to do is borrow your Bristol and get back to London to-night. There is no time to lose. I can't speak for Sophy Cleft, but from what I know of Rupert Thorn this is no practical joke. Unless I'm much mistaken it's a teeny touch of practical blackmail. I've a notion that you'll be getting some more anonymous letters pretty soon . . . business ones."

As they turned back towards the house they saw another trio in the distance, walking the cliffs. Louise shaded her eyes against the sun.

"Why, there's Rose and Miss Blazer and General Grummit. Everybody is wonderfully energetic this afternoon. Oh perhaps it's just nerves."

Rupert sank down on the sofa in the drawing-room at Malmsey Close and drained three cups of China tea without pause ; then he lay back with a contented sigh.

"My idea of hell is London on a hot Sunday afternoon. However, the trip was well worth while. You will be interested to learn that all our victims have reacted violently."

"How violently?" enquired Sophy. "Any good suicides? There was nothing amusing on the one o'clock news."

"They've all disappeared, gone for a rest in the country and left no address."

"How did you discover that?"

"By telephone. And what a job I had, ringing-up from different call-boxes all over London!"

"Very tedious for you. We must remember to charge them for the calls. Did you have any difficulty?"

"None. It's surprising what a prompt response you get to your enquiries when you announce yourself as the Prime Minister or the Archbishop of Canterbury or the Secretary of State for War."

"And what's the next move?"

"Oh, the real thing, I think: a pithy little demand-note requesting a prompt cash payment, or else. . . . We'll give them a week to get back from their country retreats, and then start milking them properly."

"About how much are you thinking of charging? As they're all old friends of mine, I shouldn't like to pauperise them. On the other hand, we're both putting a lot of hard work into this business, and we must see that we make it worth our while."

"Quite so." Rupert thoughtfully rubbed his chin. "Personally, I think we ought to have a sort of sliding scale and adjust our charges according to income. I suggest, by the way, that we keep our hands off the Bishop. I mean it's scarcely the thing to mulct the Church, is it?"

"I agree. In fact I think we might send him a subscription to the Cathedral repair fund."

"Certainly. It only means the others will have to pay a bit more. Sir Roland Gander, I feel, ought to head the list, followed by Ambrose Bannister, Minnie Blazer, General Gummit and my Uncle Evelyn, in that order. You approve?"

"I do not. What's the idea of putting Evelyn at the bottom? We're not having any family favouritism in this enterprise."

"Family favouritism has nothing whatever to do with it. As a matter of fact, Evelyn and I have always

fostered a profound mutual revulsion. It's a question of common equity. All the others are far richer."

"What about this Uncle Ned caper?"

"There's nothing much in that, as you very well know."

"There may be nothing much in it at present, but that's his fault. If he dropped this incognito nonsense and really commercialised himself he'd make a fortune overnight."

"Agreed. But he'd never do that. You know how fastidious he is about the family name and so forth."

"He'll damn well have to do it if we squeeze him hard enough. Potentially, your uncle is the richest of the lot, and he'll have to pay accordingly."

Rupert looked up sharply. "I say, what goes on? You do sound bitter. I really believe you're after the old gentleman's blood. Am I to understand that you nourish a grudge . . ."

He broke off as Sophy turned her head away and stared out of the window.

"Not a grudge," she said at last. "Just a teeny-wee touch of pique. You see, I was once madly in love with Evelyn. I proposed to him six times with a resounding lack of success."

"You astound me. I never heard of this before. Was that why you took off to foreign parts?"

"It was."

"And you never hooked up with anyone else?"

"Never; except in a way of exercise."

When she turned towards him again, Rupert was astonished to see a tear sliding down her cheek. He blushed acutely and examined his finger-nails.

"Sophy . . ."

"Yes?"

"Are you still in love with him?"

"Of course I am. More than ever now I've seen him doing Uncle Ned."

Rupert whipped notebook and pencil from his pocket. "I'm delighted to hear it. It's time Evelyn was taught a very sharp lesson. We'll put him right at the top of the list and charge him two thousand pounds. That, perhaps, will awaken him to a sense of his responsibilities."

"Make it guineas whilst you're at it," said Sophy. "Evelyn always liked to do things in style."

Towards midnight Rupert threw down his pen and sighed wearily. He was surrounded by a litter of spent matches and torn-up paper.

"I would never have believed that blackmail was such hard work. No wonder the criminal classes regard it with contempt. I can't seem to get these demand-notes right. It's infuriating."

Sophy packed up her game of patience. "I can't think what you're niggling about. Surely it's quite simple. Just a few terse lines to say that their private lives will be public property unless . . ."

Rupert shook his head. "You don't understand what it is to be an artist: the endless search for perfection, the ceaseless preoccupation with style and technique. It makes no difference whether one is composing a five act verse-drama or demanding money with menaces; there is always the remorseless struggle for the mot juste, for the elegantly turned phrase, for the rhythms that caress the ear. I make no mention of the psychological angle. It's no use just hammering out a standardised round-robin. Each victim must be addressed in terms suited to his or her temperament: for Sir Roland Gander the circumlocutory style of the

departmental minute; for General Grummit the clipped, tabulated manner of regimental orders; for Minnie Blazer a torrent of abusive threats . . . and so on."

Sophy yawned and stretched. "Well, I'm going to bed. Are you coming?"

"No. I shall be grappling with my literary problems for several hours yet."

She looked at him quizzically. "What a curious boy you are, Rupert. So frivolous and yet such a glutton for work. I've rarely come across such energy and application. If you went into business you'd make a fortune in no time."

Rupert fondled his brandy balloon and pensively inhaled the aroma of the Armagnac. "I take no credit. It's simply a matter of being comfortable. Like all true artists, I am happy only when I have some major task in hand. Idleness breeds feelings of guilt, early morning *angst*, and constipation. Ceaseless activity, that is the secret of the happy life. Otherwise, of course, you may start thinking . . . and then you're done for."

"No relaxation at all?" said Sophy. "What about a little love? What about marriage, even? Have you never thought of settling down, Rupert?"

"Never. Like Chamfort, I refrain from marriage for fear of breeding a son like myself."

"Come, come. You're not so revolting as all that."

"Thank you, but you misunderstand me. What I'm afraid of is producing an inferior copy of a unique masterpiece."

"I see. Then what about love alone, without marriage?"

"I've tried it, but I can't find the right type of

colleague. The very few women who really aren't interested in marriage always seem rather . . . well . . . monsters. No ; by and large, it's nappies or nothing. I prefer nothing."

"You mean that at the age of twenty-nine you've finally finished with the doxies?"

"Oh no, I wouldn't say that. With my perfect digestion and brandy-proof kidneys I'm an incorrigible optimist. I keep on hoping that sometime, somewhere, I shall find the lady who comes up to my requirements and, what's more important, down to them. Now Louise Gale . . ."

"Ah !"

"Yes. She struck me as being something quite exceptional. My Uncle Evelyn, apparently, thinks so too. And what he doesn't know about women is scarcely worth mentioning, as I'm sure you're aware."

"What he does know about women is scarcely fit to mention ; I'm well aware of that, And I've no doubt Miss Gale is too by now."

"Oh, come. You're not suggesting that my venerable next-of-kin is actually . . ."

"I'm suggesting nothing. All I know is that when Evelyn Chancery finds himself adjacent to an attractive woman he doesn't spend his time discoursing on the English Poetic Tragedy."

Rupert slowly put down his glass. "Upon my soul . . . the naughty old rackapelt !" He snatched up his pen and notebook. "My nonconformist conscience is outraged. We'll stick another five hundred guineas on him for that, just to cool his ardour a fraction."

At eleven a.m. Louise was drifting down the better side of Bond Street in a ruthless summer frock by Gilberte and a dissolute hat by Charlus. As she quivered along the crowded pavement on her four-inch heels she was happily aware of the ravenous glances of the young men who passed her, and the X-ray stares of the old ones. What pleased her even more was the flash of hostility in the eyes of the women : that automatic baring of the mental claws with which the attractive and well-dressed female acknowledges the approach of a rival.

Her sense of well-being was further intensified by the excitement of the chase. She was determined to run Rupert Thorn to ground and puncture that insolent young poet's enormous self-satisfaction. But she did not underestimate the task. The trail would almost certainly be long and arduous, fraught with false starts, dead ends and fed herrings. Meanwhile, the omens were propitious. The sun was shining ; she was looking her best ; and a celebrated portrait painter had just fallen headlong over his own umbrella in a frantic attempt to get a better view of this and that.

She turned into the headquarters of the Maiso Polo travel agency and asked for the manager. After crushing several underlings she was finally passed through to an office containing a glossy young lady seated at a typewriter, filing her nails.

" You wish to see Commander Lapyard ? "

The secretary's supercilious manner and constipated accent irritated Louise.

"The name is neither here nor there. It's the top man I want, the supreme gaffer."

"Have you an appointment?"

"Of course not. I'm a busy woman."

"Then I'm afraid it's quite impossible for you to see Commander Lanyard. He's in conference."

Louise smiled sweetly. "Shall we skip the nonsense? I happen to know something about business routine. It's now ten minutes past eleven. Unless I'm very much mistaken, the Commander is just finishing *The Times* crossword puzzle and wondering how soon he can decently slip out to luncheon. If you won't help me, I shall have to help myself."

With this she strode smartly across the room and through the door on the far side.

"What the devil . . ."

Commander Lanyard leapt to his feet, deftly concealing with a sheaf of papers the jigsaw puzzle on his blotting-pad. Louise recognised the familiar stigmata of the Royal Navy: smooth pale skin; blue-grey eyes pickled by oceans of salt water and gin; chronic delusions of grandeur.

"Sorry if I've made you lose your place, but I'm in a hurry, and your typist was being difficult. May I sit down?"

One good look had pacified the ex-seadog. With the nimble motions of a conjurer he dismissed his secretary who was still chirruping on the threshold, closed the door, drew up an armchair, produced gin and cigarettes, and replaced his nautical scowl with a seductive grin.

"This is indeed a delightful surprise. No, don't

apologise, please. Only too happy to be of service. What can I do for you, Miss . . ."

"Gale. Louise Gale. I'm afraid my business is rather unusual."

"Don't worry about that. We fix anything here. What were you thinking of? We've just arranged a very interesting little tour to the Belgian Congo for the annual fertility rituals, travelling either by air, or by camel caravan across the Sahara. I can highly recommend it. Educative and enthralling to a degree. And the accommodation is really very good, very good indeed; though customers are advised to take their own spades. Or perhaps you were thinking of something more original, something right off the beaten track? What about a hunting trip with the native mole-trappers in the Lincolnshire Wolds, or . . ."

"Thank you, thank you, but I haven't come to discuss travel plans. I want to make enquiries about one of your employes, a young man called Rupert Thorn."

At this the Commander underwent a startling metamorphosis. The toothpaste smile yielded to a grimace of maniacal rage. His hands locked on the edge of his desk. He crouched forward in his chair, pulsating from top to bottom as if racked by some interior convulsion.

"Thorn, did you say? Rupert Thorn! That brazen young bug . . . the impudent young bas . . . that . . ."

"All right, all right," said Louise. "Your point is taken. From the general trend of your remarks I assume that he doesn't work for you any longer."

With a supreme effort the Commander harnessed his emotions and planted his elbows on his desk.

"You are quite right, Miss Gale. Rupert Thorn does *not* work for me any longer. What's more, I never want to see or hear of him again ; never so long as I live."

He wagged a forefinger under Louise's nose. "And if you take my advice you will steer clear of him yourself. Believe me, he is a danger to the public ; a thoroughly ruthless crook who ought to be behind bars."

"Oh, come !"

"I mean it. Every word of it. You wouldn't credit the disgusting trick he played on me."

"No ?"

"Blackmail, that's what it was. Sheer blackmail. He had a job as host for this agency at Bellagio on Lake Como. A few weeks ago, it seems, he started paying attention to the wife of one of our clients. The fellow actually found him in his wife's bedroom."

"What was he doing there ?"

The Commander flushed a trifle. "Well, really, Miss Gale ! However, since you ask, I will tell you that he was actually . . . er . . . popping the question."

"What question ?"

"Er . . . the question, Miss Gale. My client heard it distinctly : a man's voice in his wife's room saying, 'To be or not to be, that is the question.' Those were the very words. And shouted at the top of his voice, mark you. Not even the decency to be discreet about it. You seem to find it amusing. I must confess I don't share your sense of humour."

Louise repressed her giggles. "I'm sorry : but it is rather funny when you know the form. You see, Rupert Thorn is a most peculiar man, Commander Lanyard. He has only one use for a pretty woman :

as an audience for his views on the English Poetic Tragedy."

"What!"

"Yes. Your outraged client was labouring under a painful misapprehension. Rupert was not seducing his wife, poor girl. He was merely chastening her animal passions with a critical analysis of the soliloquies in Hamlet."

"Well, if he was," replied the Commander, "he didn't get very far with it, because my client broke the door down and pitched the young cad over the balcony. And a good job, too."

"Oh, I say! The poor boy! He must have been terribly smashed up."

"There's no need to waste any sympathy on Rupert Thorn, I assure you. He was considerably knocked about, of course; but not nearly enough for my taste. Do you know what he did?"

"Started on the soliloquies in Macbeth?"

The Commander snorted irritably. "It's no laughing matter. He came back here and demanded three hundred pounds damages for injuries received in the course of his professional duties."

"And did you pay him?"

"I had to. Otherwise, he threatened to sue my client for assault. He was absolutely shameless about it. Said quite frankly that he knew he wouldn't stand a chance of winning his case, but he'd take damn good care to make hell of a scandal out of it. I couldn't contemplate that sort of thing, of course. It would have been so bad for the business. So I had to pay up."

The Commander relaxed somewhat and poured out more gin. "Let's have another drink. Whenever I

think of that insolent young puppy I break out into cold sweats."

"Have you any idea where he is at present?"

"Not the slightest. Nor do I wish to know. I hope, by the way, that he isn't a friend or relation of yours? If so, you must forgive my speaking out like this; but he did serve me a very dirty trick."

"Don't disturb yourself. We are not associated in any way. I want to find him because there is a matter of some importance outstanding between us."

"He owes you money? Then I wish you luck. If you get it back I shall be very much surprised."

"It's not money he owes me, Commander Lanyard. It's just a little common civility. You see, I, too, was in Bellagio recently, where I was subjected to the same indignities as your client's wife. I, unfortunately, had no husband at hand to throw him over the balcony."

"You mean . . ."

"Precisely. And he didn't even pay me the compliment of reciting Shakespeare. All I got was Act Three of *The Jetman's Revenge*. I think you owe me some rebate."

The Commander half rose to his feet. "Some rebate? Do you mean that you were one of our customers, too?"

"I was; and a somewhat dissatisfied one, as I'm sure you'll understand."

For several seconds the Commander sat motionless. Then he flicked the microphone switch on his desk.

"Miss Tappet, you can go for luncheon at once. Yes, I know it's only half-past eleven. Don't argue. And tell them downstairs that I shall be occupied until further notice."

Louise reached for her handbag. "Please, please,

Commander Lanyard. "There's no need to disorganise the entire office on my account."

"Don't mention it, Miss Gale. You've just told me that you weren't satisfied with our amenities, and so . . ."

"I assure you I was only joking."

"A breakdown in our service is no joking matter. It is the proud boast of the Marco Polo travel agency that there is no such thing as a dissatisfied customer."

He strode to the door, locked it, and recrossed the room.

"Another pink gin? No? Then allow me to relieve you of your handbag and gloves. And may I suggest that you remove your hat? It would be a pity to spoil it. These things cost money."

Half an hour later the Commander was putting Louise into a cab. As it pulled away from the kerb she poked her head through the window, waved and smiled.

"Good-bye, Commander Lanyard, and very many thanks. At last I understand what is meant by the Nelson Touch."

At eleven-thirty, Sophy dropped Rupert at Malmsey Hautboys station.

"I don't envy your traipsing round London on a day like this. What train do you want me to meet?"

"I hope to catch the four-thirty. I haven't a great deal to do. First luncheon, then a conference with my bootmaker, after which I think I'll look in on my literary agent to see if he's done anything with *The Jetman's Revenge*. I must keep an eye on my business affairs, you know. Poetry comes first, blackmail is only my hobby."

Uncommonly spruce in a dark town suit, Rupert leaned into the back of the car and extracted his bowler hat, rolled umbrella and Adolphe.

"Come on, you idle sod! And don't slobber all over my trousers."

The bulldog waddled out of the car, wheezing like a defective pump. Rupert pulled on his gloves and attached the leash.

"I think we go rather well together, sharing, as we do, the sterling moral qualities of the Island Race: imperturbable phlegm, dogged perseverance, and a tendency to bite outsiders in the leg."

"I do hope he behaves himself," said Sophy. "I'm not at all sure that it's wise of you to take him. You know he's never been to London before."

"Then he's due for a touch of metropolitan polish. If I have time I'll take him to my hairdresser's and treat him to a shampoo and a pedicure."

As Rupert strolled elegantly into the station, towing Adolphe in rear, Sophy watched him with a tender smile.

"Just like dear Evelyn," she murmured to herself. "God help the doxies."

Shamus Skindle was hard at work when the buzzer sounded on his desk. With a shrug of impatience he put aside his knitting and flicked the switch.

"A young lady to see me? No appointment, you say? Then send her away. I'm very busy. . . . What? Chestnut hair and a good forty winks? Then send her in immediately. What are you waiting for?"

Louise stepped into the publisher's sanctum to find him poring over a massive manuscript. He held the pose for a well-judged ten seconds. Then he suddenly

looked up and sprang to his feet with an exclamation of surprise.

"My dear young lady! Pray forgive me. One gets so terribly immersed in one's work that . . ."

"So I notice," replied Louise. She leaned across the desk and tweaked a half-knitted yellow sock from under the pile of manuscript. "I'm afraid I've made you drop a stitch."

Shamus led her into the tasteful Regency parlour, adjoining his office, where he entertained favoured visitors and his more successful authors.

"Do sit down, Miss . . ."

"Gale. Louise Gale."

"What a charming name, if I may say so. Try the chaise-longue. It's not nearly so uncomfortable as it looks. And what will you drink? Vermouth, Pernod, Picon?"

"I'd like a pink gin."

"Ah, you have robust tastes, I see."

"Yes, I have Naval connections, and it's catching."

Shamus relaxed into an armchair, carefully deploying his beautiful trousers, and swept up the horns of his moustache.

"And now, Miss Gale, I am entirely at your service. What have you got for me? A witty little novel perhaps, full of champagne and diddle-cum-wedlock? Or something in the biographical line? Believe me, I shall be delighted to consider anything you choose to bring to my attention."

"I haven't anything to show you, Mr. Skindle. I'm not an author myself. What I've come for is to make enquiries about Rupert Thorn."

"Ah, my poet! A delightful fellow, young Rupert, but obstinate. You know, Miss Gale, I just can't seem

to make that boy see reason. You're familiar with his stuff no doubt? Excellent in its way, but just lacking that teenyweeny something that would jerk us all into the big money."

"There didn't seem to be anything lacking in *Love In Our Time*. I have to keep my copy in the refrigerator and read it under a cold shower . . . and then I can't see for the steam."

' True, true. Apart from a ninety-year-old thriller writer, Rupert is quite the most bedridden author on my list. But his tone is wrong, Miss Gale. He's far too cheerful about it all. What his stuff needs is a strong injection of mental agonies and seedy boarding-houses. *A sense of sin* : that's what he ought to develop, as I was telling him only last week."

Louise perked up. "You saw him last week? Then perhaps you can tell me where to find him."

Shamus shook his head. "Terribly sorry, but I'm afraid I can't help you. I haven't the faintest idea where he's living. Rupert is never in the same place for two minutes together ; or in the same continent, for that matter."

"But surely he must have some sort of address, Mr. Skindle. Otherwise, how do you conduct your business with him?"

"I repeat, Miss Gale; that Rupert is quite the most difficult of my authors. I don't do business with him : he does it with me. On the average I hear from him once a year when he shoots in a liquor-soaked manuscript bearing the postmark of one of the more lurid foreign seaports. I see him, on the average, twice a year, when he dashes into my office demanding money. As for having an address, he doesn't hold with the practice, maintaining, as he does, that an address

serves only as a swarming-point for rude men with writs."

"And when you saw him last week he really gave no hint at all of his whereabouts?"

"None. In fact, he was even more secretive than usual; rather offensively so, I may say. I can only suggest that you leave a letter for him here, and I'll see that he gets it when he next calls in; though I should warn you that it may be another six months before he does so."

Louise sighed and lay back on the cushions, linking her hands behind her head, thereby causing Shamus's eyes to stand out like iced lollies.

"I'm afraid that's no good. It's imperative that I see him personally."

Shamus drew his chair closer and leaned forward earnestly. "I don't wish to pry into your affairs, Miss Gale, but if I can be of any help I shall be only too delighted. Perhaps you wish to discuss his work with him. . . . Oh, I say!"

He recoiled in alarm as Louise jerked upright with a snort of indignation.

"Wish to discuss his work with him! I would sooner suffer myself to be torn apart by wild horses. That at least would be preferable to suffocation with a surfeit of semi-colons."

"Really, Miss Gale," protested Shamus, "I don't understand you. I only thought that . . ."

"You don't? Then I'll explain. After which you may have a clearer notion of that teenyweeny something that's lacking in his work."

Some minutes later Shamus replenished the glasses, nodding sympathetically.

"I see your point of view, Miss Gale, I do indeed.

But you must make allowances for the artistic temperament. When a writer is locked in the agonies of composition, nothing must be allowed to disturb him. Nothing whatsoever."

"So it seems."

"The layman, I know, finds this difficult to understand. But I, as a publisher, have long realised that if my authors are to give of their best they must be freed from all distractions. Accordingly, I make it a practice, in so far as I am able, to assist them with their outside obligations."

"Very praiseworthy, I'm sure."

Shamus drew his chair still nearer. "Some of the responsibilities I find myself faced with are tedious, if not unpleasant; such as arranging for the emptying of earth-closets in remote rural localities, and buying consignments of babies' dummy-teats. Others, on the other hand, are very agreeable, very agreeable indeed. It depends on the author."

He paused to put aside the occasional table which stood between them. "Now Rupert, Miss Gale, is a real pleasure to look after. We have a very happy understanding which is best summed up in his own words: 'I grind out the doggerel, Shamus; the rest is up to you.' Believe me, dear young lady, there's nothing I wouldn't do for Rupert. I make no mention of my duty, as a publisher, towards the sacrosanct traditions of our great national literature, a duty which, though often burdensome in the highest degree. . . . I beg your pardon?"

"I said, where shall I put my hat?"

At three o'clock they came out of *El Greco*, and Shamus put Louise into a taxi.

"A very delightful interlude, if I may say so, Miss Gale. I only wish that all my authors' chores were

such a pleasure to undertake. I'm so very sorry that I can't be of more help to you in finding the boy ; but, as I say, it might be worth your while to see his agent. A charming fellow, Mark Hanker, and I'm sure he'll do what he can, especially if you tell him I sent you. But I don't hold out much hope."

As the cab pulled away from the kerb, Louise poked her head out of the window and blew a kiss.

"Good-bye, Mr. Skindle. And thank you so much for everything. At last I understand what is meant by the artistic temperament."

"It's really very naughty of you, Rupert, to keep on disappearing like this. You might at least have given me a poste-restante address or something. God knows, I try to do my best for my authors, but handling you is like trying to handle a greased phantom. And when you do finally turn up, you must needs bring a bloody ravenous monster into my office which bites me in the shin and ruins my new suit."

Mark Hanker, a tall slim young man with a fountain of red hair and piercing green eyes, was sitting cross-legged on his desk where he had been driven by the assaults of Adolphe.

"I'm glad somebody wants to see me," said Rupert. "It makes a nice change. And now that I am here, have you got any lovely surprises for me?"

"As a matter of fact I have, though you don't deserve it. It's that horrible great verse-drama of yours, *The Jetman's Revenge*. Herbert Derrick is crazy about it, God alone knows why. It bored me rigid. Anyway, he's made a very handsome offer for the thing. And don't say you'll think it over, because you know very well you can't afford thinking."

"This is really most gratifying," said Rupert. "But scarcely a surprise, Mark. After all, genius, like truth, will out."

"Needless to say he wants the thing mucked about a bit."

"Of course. They always do ; except Shamus who's too busy with his knitting. What does Derrick want ? If he's baulking at all those semi-colons, he's had it. Nothing will persuade me to alter a single one."

"More obscurity, that's what he wants. He considers you a most promising young playwright, but handicapped at present by a marked tendency towards lucidity. In fact he says that, as the thing stands, at least half the customers will know what it's about."

"Then they're a damn-sight smarter than I am."

"You think you can obfuscate the job a fraction ?"

"I'll try. Anything to oblige."

"Splendid ; though I'm afraid it'll mean a lot of work for you."

"Not at all. I shall simply re-type the whole thing back-to-front. That'll fox the bastards."

"Before you start your alterations, you'd better take a look at this letter. It'll give you some idea of what Derrick wants."

Rupert accepted the three sheets of typescript, lit his pipe and took out his spectacle frames.

"You still use those damn silly things, I notice," said Mark. "However, I suppose most poets are stark staring mad."

"They're very necessary to my work," replied Rupert curtly. "Believe me, by the time I've finished obfuscating The Jetman, I shall need a pair of fog-lamps to see the typewriter."

They were interrupted by Mark's secretary.

"Excuse me, Mr. Harker, there's a young lady to see you. She says Mr. Skindle has sent her."

"Indeed? Did she give her name?"

"Yes. Miss Louise Gale."

"What!" Rupert was on his feet, thrusting back his chair. "For God's sake, Mark, don't let that girl in here."

"But my dear chap!"

"Don't ask me to explain, because I can't. But it's absolutely imperative that she doesn't see me. What's more, she mustn't know that I'm in London, or in England even. You must send her away at once."

"But I can't do that, Rupert. If she's been sent by Shamus I must see her. It's only common civility."

"Then I shall have to clear out until you've finished with her. Where is she?"

"Waiting in the outside office," replied the secretary. "And from the looks of things she won't wait much longer. Ever so impatient she is."

"Then you'll have to get her out of the way until I've made my escape. This is vital, Mark."

"All right, all right, steady yourself. I can't imagine what all the fuss is about; but anything to humour a poet. . . . Look, I tell you what. You nip in next door there and have a chat with old Kit Marlowe. He's fanatical about the Jetman. Meanwhile, I'll have the girl in and get rid of her as soon as possible. Then we can go on with our talk. I shan't be a jiffy, I promise you."

Rupert made for the door on the opposite side of the room. "Right. But remember, Mark! If she asks about me, don't tell her a thing. Not a thing. Say you haven't seen or heard of me for the past twelve months. You understand?"

"Calm yourself, old boy. I'll stall her off. You can depend on me."

A moment later Mark was shaking Louise warmly by the hand.

"Miss Gale? This is indeed a pleasant surprise. Always more than delighted to see a friend of Shamus. Do sit down. And a glass of sherry, perhaps? Excellent, excellent. And now, please tell me what I can do for you."

"Well, Mr. Hanker, it's like this . . ."

She broke off sharply as something warm and wet slid across the finger-tips of her disengaged hand.

"Good gracious me! What a charming animal, Mr. Hanker. I love bulldogs. Why, the pet! Look, he's licking all the varnish off my nails. What do you call him?"

"I . . . er . . . don't know. That is . . ."

"You don't *know*? But how extraordinary. Surely you must call him something?"

Mark swallowed hastily. "Well, you see, he's not my dog. Belongs to a friend of mine. I'm just looking after him for the . . . er . . . present. And now, Miss Gale," he continued firmly, "if I can help you in any way, I am entirely at your service."

"Of course. I mustn't waste your time gossiping. I just want to know if you can tell me where to find Rupert Thorn. Mr. Skindle informs me that you handle Mr. Thorn's affairs, so I thought you might know his present address."

Mark threw out his hands. "Alas, Miss Gale, you've defeated me. I do indeed handle Rupert's affairs, but where he is at the present time I haven't the faintest notion. It sounds fantastic, I know; but it's the truth. Rupert is a singularly elusive young man."

"But if you're his agent, surely you have to keep in touch with him?"

"I try to, but with very little success. In fact; I've pretty well given it up as a bad job. I just wait, and hope that he'll turn up when he's wanted."

"May I ask when you last saw him?"

"Well . . . let me think. About a year ago, I should say."

"And you've no idea when you're likely to see him again?"

"Frankly, I haven't. I'm terribly sorry."

Louise sighed, and leaned forward to reach the ash-tray, thereby causing Mark to drop his cigarette, overturn his *sherry* and gasp like a blown tyre.

They were interrupted by the telephone. Mark groped for the receiver. "Hanker speaking. Oh, it's you, Shamus. Yes, yes, Miss Gale is here with me now." He flashed a smile at Louise across the instrument and bowed profoundly. "Certainly she's told me what she wants, but as I was saying to her a moment ago, I'm very much afraid I can't help her. I've no idea where Rupert . . . *What's* that you say? What do you mean, I ought to be ashamed of myself? If I could do anything. . . . All right, then, Go on. I'm listening."

For some moments he listened, and with ever increasing attention.

"I see," he said at last. "I see. Thank you very much indeed, Shamus. I'm deeply indebted to you. Of course I'll let you have the first refusal of Benedict's new book. Don't mention it. The very least I can do."

He put down the receiver and dashed around his desk to the door. His voice sounded urgently in the outer office.

"Miss Whittle! I want you to block all telephone

calls, and cancel all my appointments until further notice. You understand? No interruptions whatsoever. I have some very urgent business to attend to."

A moment later he re-entered the room and closed the door decisively.

"And now, Miss Gale, I suggest we take up where we left off. I gather from my telephone conversation with Mr. Skindle that I may be able to help you after all."

He advanced with a glamorous smile, only to stumble over Adolphe recumbent in the middle of the carpet.

"Good heavens, that dog! What on earth is he eating? Oh, I say! How awful! It's . . . it's your hat, Miss Gale."

Louise finished her sherry, and crushed out her cigarette. "Don't disturb him, Mr. Hanker. He seemed to like the look of it, so I thought he might as well have it. I never get a chance to wear the thing."

In due course, Louise gathered up her belongings.

"Well, I really must be on my way, Mr. Hanker. I'm very much obliged to you for your invaluable assistance. I now understand why it is so important for an author to have an enterprising agent."

As she picked her gloves off the desk, something fell on to the floor at her feet. She bent down with a cry of alarm.

"Oh, dear! Your spectacles. I am a clumsy idiot. I do hope I haven't . . . but how very peculiar! There aren't any lenses in them."

She replaced the massive horn frames on the desk.

"I'm most intrigued, Mr. Hanker. Do tell me what you use them for. Spotting the pitfalls in contracts? Or just playing charades with the staff?"

"I . . . er . . . don't use them, Miss Gale. That

is to say they . . . er . . . aren't mine. They belong to a friend."

"Oh, I see. You mean the same friend who owns this amusing dog? He must be quite a character."

"Er . . . yes. Or, rather, that is. . . ." He took a deep breath and made for the door. "Look, if you'll forgive me one moment, I'll just run down and tell them to get you a cab. Shan't be a second."

He had scarcely crossed the threshold when Louise slipped round behind his desk and crouched down beside the bulldog who was champing away at her hat under the armchair. She patted him cautiously, whereupon he gave her an amiable grin and started to lick the nail-varnish off her other hand. Whilst he was thus engaged, she eased his collar around until she could read the metal plate.

'Adolphe Cleft. Malmsey Close. Malmsey Hautboys.'

A few minutes later Mark and Rupert had just resumed their conference when they were again interrupted.

"Excuse me, Mr. Hanker, but there's a young lady to see you. She says Mr. Skindle has sent her, and it's very urgent indeed."

"Good God! Another? Did she give her name?"

"Yes. Miss Rose Petal."

## 12

As soon as she got back to Chestnut Square Louise sent a guarded telegram to Sir Roland Gander at The Lenely Pilchard, advising him that hounds were in full cry. Then she set her alarm clock and went to bed.

After three hours' sleep, a long hot bath, and a pint of claret with her dinner, she was ready for the night's work. She put on a sweater, slacks and rope-soled sandals, slipped a small electric torch into her pocket, and, after a moment's thought, added a bottle of nail varnish.

It was eleven o'clock when she reached Malmsey Hautboys. On the outskirts of the village she turned off the main road and drove for a mile along a narrow winding lane. If her navigation were correct, The Close lay somewhere behind the belt of trees on her left. Presently she came to a crumbling stone gateway beyond which a rough track disappeared amongst the undergrowth. She switched off all the lights, eased the car into the coppice and parked behind a barrier of bushes.

She emerged from the trees into a wide flat paddock. Two hundred yards ahead rose the black outline of a house. The side facing her was in darkness, but on the left flank a broad oblong of light indicated open french windows.

This was it. The night was still, sultry, and moonless, the stars veiled by a mauve haze : ideal conditions

for a reconnaissance. She tightened the tapes of her espadrilles, rolled her sweater sleeves up to the elbow and strode swiftly across the crisp turf.

Sophy looked up from her cards and sighed fretfully. "Haven't you finished those letters yet? This is the second night you've spent on them. I'm getting rather bored with it."

Rupert swept the hair out of his eyes and flourished some sheets of paper covered with scrawled handwriting.

"Shan't be long now. These are the final drafts. Just a matter of typing them, then I've finished." He surveyed his work with intense satisfaction. "Proper little gems they are, too. Each one carefully adapted to the temperament of the recipient, and all of them distinguished by that limpid yet sinewy style associated with the pen of R. Thorn. What I particularly like is the blend of suave menace and whimsical banter; a bitter-sweet flavour which lingers on the palate and . . ."

"For pity's sake get them finished," said Sophy. "Then we'll have a cup of tea."

They were interrupted by a bubbling growl from Adolphe who was lying on the hearthrug.

Rupert shied a cushion at him. "Silence, you asthmatical bagpipe! How can I get on with my work if you lie there rumbling like a bow-legged volcano!"

But Adolphe refused to be hushed. He heaved himself to his feet and shambled to the french windows, where he stood glowering into the night with renewed chunterings and wheezings.

"His trip to London has thoroughly unsettled him," said Sophy. "I expect he wants to go to a night club. Or else he can smell that licentious tomcat of the

Rector's. 'The brute lounges out there, on top of the summer house, boasting about his sex-life until poor Adolphe is in a perfect whirl.'

At this point the bulldog suddenly ceased his muttering and padded briskly through the windows into the garden.

At half-past twelve Rupert pushed back his chair with a grunt of satisfaction. "Well, that's that. A very agreeable way of earning ten thousand pounds. I'm extremely grateful to Shamus for squashing your book. He's saved us a deal of hard labour."

Sophy looked slightly piqued. "I still think we should have done much better if only Skindle had had the guts to publish. Not to mention the loss to the treasure-house of English literature."

Rupert shook his head. "I don't agree. The book would have done very well, no doubt. But once it had run its course we should have exhausted all our assets. With blackmail, on the other hand, you always have something in store against a rainy day. Nor must we forget the income tax. That would have made a nasty hole in our receipts. Believe me, ten thousand pounds tax free is not to be sneezed at."

"I suppose you're right. By the way, how did you finally decide to divide it up?"

"General Grummit, fifteen hundred; Miss Blazer, Sir Roland Gander and Ambrose Bannister, two thousand apiece; Uncle Evelyn, two thousand five hundred. I hope you don't mind the reduced fees for the General, but as an ex-gunner myself, I felt I couldn't squeeze him too hard. I always was a sentimental old softy."

"So I've noticed. The only thing is . . ."

"Yes? What?"

"I wonder if we're being unfair to Evelyn. Two thousand five hundred is quite a sum of money, you know. Do you think he can really afford it? I shouldn't like to deprive him of all his little comforts."

Rupert wagged a forefinger and smiled roguishly. "Aha! So that's the trouble. After all these years the fires of passion still burn with a hard gem-like flame."

"Don't be ridiculous. I've told you already that he refused me six times. It's simply that I don't want to pauperise an old playmate."

"Just as you like, Sophy. I leave it entirely to you. It makes no difference to me."

"What do you mean, it makes no difference to you? You've become very high-minded all of a sudden, haven't you?"

"I mean that the financial angle of our scheme no longer concerns me. It's all yours." He avoided her brilliant blue stare and enveloped himself in a dense smoke-screen. "You see it's like this, Sophy. Now that Hubert Derrick has taken *The Jetman's Revenge*, I shall be very comfortably placed. You, on the other hand, are in a pretty tight corner. You've sold most of your jewellery, you tell me, and you have a thumping great overdraft at the bank. In short, your need is very much greater than mine."

She crossed the room and laid her hand on his shoulder. "Rupert, you're a pet. I really don't know what to say. It's very civil of you, very civil indeed. But of course I couldn't think of accepting such an offer."

"Then I shall have to make you see reason. Just a moment whilst I find my spectacles. Now!"

Ten minutes later Rupert had gained his point.

"So that's that, and I don't want to hear another word about it. The privilege of helping the one and

only Sophy Cleft out of her difficulties is a more than ample reward for my labours."

Sophy patted his cheek and gave him a sad, sweet smile. "The more I see of you, dear boy, the more you remind me of your——"

Rupert interrupted her with a cry of anguish. "Listen, Sophy. If you liken me once more to my Uncle Evelyn I shall gather up my skirts and flounce out in a huff. In this case the comparison is particularly inappropriate. My decision has been prompted by a sentiment which Evelyn has never shared with me or anyone else: I mean a keen sense of sin. Travelling home in the train this afternoon, I experienced what I can only describe as a mystical revelation. The scales fell from my eyes, and I suddenly realised that if I allowed myself to profit from your memoirs I should be guilty of the most degrading offence in the entire catalogue of moral squalor. In the course of my twenty-nine years I have turned some pretty dirty tricks, but I have never yet lived on the earnings of women. I may be a cad, but at least I'm a gentleman."

"Very praiseworthy. But you do your uncle an injustice. Evelyn has always been intensely preoccupied with sin."

"I must confess I hadn't noticed it."

"Well, it all depends on one's point of view. You see he calls it a keen sense of fun."

Whilst Sophy went to brew the tea, Rupert cleared up his work. He checked over the letters for the last time and slipped them into their envelopes. Then he crumpled up the hand-written drafts and tossed them into the empty hearth. He was putting a match to them when Sophy came back with the tea-tray.

"Come along. We'll drink this outside."

"All right. Shan't be a second. I'm just destroying incriminating evidence."

He set fire to the paper, switched off the lights and followed Sophy out on to the lawn. As he stepped through the french windows he passed within a yard of Louise who was pressed against the wall, with Adolphe contentedly licking nail varnish out of the palm of her hand.

A moment later she slipped into the darkened room and darted to the fireplace. The screwed-up paper had been slow to ignite. One sheet was considerably charred, but the other four were untouched. She thrust them all into her pocket, then grabbed five fresh sheets from the writing-table, dropped them into the hearth and set fire with her cigarette lighter.

This done, she pondered her next move. She had secured some very valuable evidence, and there was nothing now to prevent her making a safe retreat. She had only to find the front door and return across the field to her car. But having got thus far, it would be a pity to miss anything through excessive caution. With a little boldness and perseverance she might learn something more to her advantage.

—She sidled up to the french windows and reconnoitred the lawn. Her eyes were by now well accustomed to the summer night. Rupert and Sophy were sitting in the canvas swing-seat on the far side of the grass, facing the house. Louise could hear a steady murmur of conversation punctuated by the rattle of tea-cups and the contented burblings of Adolphe whom Rupert was stuffing with sugar lumps. She determined to get within earshot. There was no cover for a frontal approach. She would have to work her way up from the rear.

She left the drawing-room, crossed the hall and let herself out by the front door. She paused to get her bearings, then set off on a wide detour through the grounds.

Three minutes later she emerged from the orchard and halted abruptly. She had angled her approach correctly enough, but she was cut off from her objective by a serious obstacle in the shape of a lily-pond the size of a tennis court. Steep grassy banks enclosed the oblong of murky water. The swing-seat containing Rupert and Sophy backed up to the brink at the farther end.

For a moment Louise was inclined to let well alone and call it a night. But her determination hardened again. She slid down the bank until her feet were almost in the water; then, clutching at the coarse grass with her hands and digging her toes into the soft earth, she began to edge along the perimeter of the pool.

Presently she was in position, lying flat on her stomach at an angle of forty-five degrees, her toes dabbling in the mud and her head just below the top of the bank. Above her, no more than ten feet away, was the back of the swing-seat. Apart from an awkwardly placed thistle, her posture was tolerably comfortable.

There was the scratch of a match followed by the reek of Rupert's wife's tobacco.

"Yes, I was pretty badly shaken, I can tell you, when they both appeared at Harker's office. I immediately assumed that they suspected something. Clearly, I'm not cut out for a criminal career. Too highly strung."

"Did Mr. Harker discover what they wanted?"

"All he could tell me was that it seemed to be a personal matter of some sort. Indeed Mark was really rather tiresome about the whole thing. He kept me waiting for over an hour whilst he got rid of them, and then said he was feeling too tired to talk business, and would I mind calling on him again later in the week."

"A personal matter? Perhaps they just wanted an apology from you."

"An apology? What on earth for?"

"My dear Rupert. Two extremely attractive young ladies call on you in your room at three o'clock in the morning, and what happens? You entertain them to two hours' intense mental exercise, and then go to sleep. If that doesn't call for an apology I don't know what does. Do you really think those girls risked their necks climbing into your apartment simply to talk about poetry?"

"Why not? Poetry is an intensely interesting subject."

Sophy drew in her breath with an audible hiss. "If my memory serves me, poetry has been defined as emotion recollected in tranquillity, and——"

"Quite so. And a very good definition, too."

"I agree. But healthy young women in their middle-twenties are not particularly interested in emotion recollected in tranquillity. What they're more concerned with is emotion dissipated in activity."

"Now you're just being frivolous."

"Not at all. If you'd treat me as you treated those two girls, I should be looking for you with a hatchet. And an exceptionally jagged one, too."

"I suppose I was a bit inhospitable," mused Rupert. "But you can't think how that kind of young women

irritates me. 'They're all the same. Just because they have pretty faces, good figures, and a certain amount of style, they assume that a man is completely at their disposal, ready to be dangled on the end of a string, if they feel like it ; or ready to make love at a moment's notice, if they happen to feel like that. I, for one, refuse to be a party to such an undignified state of affairs. We are all human, I know, and sub-tropical summer nights are notoriously provoking. But I was vexed by their bland assumption that my time and energy were automatically at their service. In the best interests of British manhood it was necessary to teach them a very sharp lesson, which, I flatter myself, I did, with my customary blend of firmness and courtesy."

Sophy banged her cup down on the table. " You're insufferable. I only hope those girls do catch up with you one day. That fine big chestnut filly would teach *you* a very sharp lesson, unless I'm much mistaken . . . with a great deal of firmness and no courtesy whatsoever."

" A determined young lady, I agree. But I should be able to handle her, I fancy."

" You think so ? "

" Oh, yes. With a girl of that sort you must begin as you mean to go on. You must put her in her place . . . and keep her there. And now, I think, we'll have a little music. I feel in sentimental mood."

There was the sound of a guitar being tuned. Then Rupert arose from the swing-seat and began to stroll around the lawn, humming snatches of this and that and thrumming idly at the strings.

Louise, peering over the parapet, watched him anxiously. He prowled up to the french windows and then turned about, pacing slowly towards her down the

middle of the lawn. This was alarming. If he continued on his present course he would come right up to the brink of the pool, in which case he would be bound to see her spreadeagled on the bank.

She raised her head and took another quick look. There was no doubt about it, he was coming straight towards her. The situation was desperate. In another twenty paces he would be on top of her. It was too late now to beat a retreat. There was only one thing to be done. She dragged the precious slips of paper from her slacks' pocket and wedged them into a tuft of grass. Then, taking a deep breath and clenching her teeth, she slid backwards down the bank into the black soupy water. A moment later she was lying prone on the muddy bottom, submerged to her chin, her face camouflaged by an overhanging lily-leaf.

The throb of the guitar drew nearer and nearer until it sounded directly overhead. Suddenly it stopped. She held her breath and just managed to suppress a jerk of revulsion as something cold and soggy nestled on the nape of her neck.

Then Rupert spoke, slowly and thoughtfully.

"You know you're quite right about that girl, Esprit."

"What are you talking about? What girl?"

"Louise Gale. As you say, she's very attractive."

"Very."

"Yes. . . . As a matter of fact, when I've wound up our present enterprise, and taken a short holiday, I think I shall marry her."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I say I think I shall marry her. You see, as a successful playwright, I shall need to stabilise myself somewhat. I shall have to set myself up in decent

quarters and do a good deal of entertaining. A wife would be very handy ; almost a necessity, indeed. Louise, as you say, is a fine big girl with plenty of style and energy. I think she would run my establishment very satisfactorily, and be something of a credit to me as well."

"No doubt."

"Of course, as we agreed just now, she would require firm handling."

"Yes, Rupert. You would have to put her in her place and keep her there."

"Precisely. And I've a notion it would be a pretty tough assignment. Indeed, upon mature reflection, I'm not at all sure that . . ."

"Come, come, my boy. It's just a matter of using your common sense. If you put her in the right place, she'll be prepared to stay there almost indefinitely."

Vivian Handspike was sitting in a sordid all-night transport café on the outskirts of Malmsey Hautboys. He was in a state of extreme agitation, chain-smoking without pause and gulping down cup after cup of rank brown tea. A plate of greasy sausage and chips lay untouched on the stained paper table, ~~over in front of~~ him.

At last, to his intense relief, Rose Petal appeared in the doorway. She motioned him back into his chair, sat down opposite to him and ordered a double helping of steak-and-kidney pie. Her face was flushed, her eyes sparkling. She spoke in a melodramatic whisper.

"Well, my boy, this is it ! I've found them. And its blackmail, just as I suspected."

"Blackmail ? How do you know ?"

"I made a close reconnaissance right up to the

drawing-room window. I watched them for a good half-hour and heard everything they said. Sophy Cleft was playing patience, and the poet was actually typing the letters. He's demanding ten thousand pounds in all, of which our syndicate is to contribute five thousand five hundred : Minnie Blazer and Ambrose Bannister two thousand apiece, General Grummit fifteen hundred. It seems there's a wonderful esprit de corps in the Royal Artillery."

"Ten thousand? The young swine!"

Rose chuckled. "He's a pretty hard case, I grant you. But I must say I can't help admiring his artistic integrity. There he was, discoursing at length upon fine points of style, and haggling endlessly over the punctuation. You'd have thought he was composing a literary masterpiece. It seems he's still insanely devoted to the semi-colon."

Vivian snorted indignantly. "Artistic integrity be damned. The sooner that fellow's put behind bars the better for all concerned. . . . And for God's sake hurry up and finish that horrible mess. This place is getting on my nerves."

"Calm yourself. There's no point in rushing things. We shall have to wait at least another two hours before we do the job."

"What are you talking about? Do what job?"

"Why, break into the house and get that typewriter, of course. Vital evidence, my boy. Absolute proof of the source of the letter." She looked up from her plate and put down the cutlery. "Why, whatever is the matter with you, Vivian? You look extremely unwell."

"Have you gone mad, Rose? Am I to understand that you really intend . . ."

"Certainly. It's perfectly simple. There's bound to

be a bedroom window open, and I've found an excellent ladder in one of the outhouses. I shall need you to help me carry it. This pie is really very good. I think I'll have some more. We must give the household plenty of time to settle down."

Vivian thumped the table with his clenched fists. "You're crazy. I won't have anything to do with such a fantastic scheme. As soon as you've finished your meal we're going straight back to town."

Rose leaned over and patted his cheek. "Now, listen, darling. Let's not waste our breath arguing, because we shall probably need it all before the night's out. I intend to get that typewriter, and you're going to help me. I think you're showing a very poor spirit. You ought to be ever so grateful for the opportunity."

"For the opportunity of getting myself cashiered and a couple of years' imprisonment? I'm afraid I don't share your sense of humour."

Rose pushed her plate aside and planted her elbows on the table. "The trouble with you is that you've no ambition, Vivian. No desire to better yourself. Just listen to me for a moment. I've told you already that General Grummit is beside himself with worry over this business; and he will be madly grateful to the person who clears the thing up. That person is going to be you. Can't you understand? Promotion, Vivian, promotion! With Splasher Grummit's goodwill behind you, you'll soar aloft like an interplanetary rocket."

"Perhaps so. But it's too risky for my taste. I'd rather earn my promotion through the normal channels."

"Very well, then. If that's your attitude, there's no more to be said. But allow me to tell you this: I've no intention of marrying you on a major's pay."

"Rose!"

"It's no use your arguing, Vivian. I mean it."

"But my dear girl, I have plenty of money of my own, as you very well know. I'm not dependent on the Army. I don't need promotion. The extra pay would be neither here nor there."

Rose leaned forward and wagged a gravy-stained knife under his nose. "Just let me tell you this, Vivian Handspike. If you marry me you'll need every extra penny you can lay your hands on. I'm a very expensive girl. Probably the costliest girl in the British Isles. So, unless you want your ring back, you'd better start earning, and sharpish. And the best way to start is by helping me to steal Rupert Thorn's typewriter. I hope I make myself quite clear."

At three a.m. they were cautiously rearing the ladder against the south wall of Malmsey Close. Rose indicated the open bedroom window immediately overhead.

"Right. I'll just go up and have a look. If the coast is clear I'll press straight on. You hold the ladder and make sure it doesn't slip."

Vivian gulped nervously. "Don't you think you'd better let me go in? After all, I mean to say . . . well . . . I am the man of the party."

Rose squeezed his arm. "Darling, that makes me very proud of you. Spoken like a true Venerable Bombardier! But I think I'd better do it. I've a fair idea of the layout of the house; and we mustn't forget that bulldog. He's an old friend of mine, but he might take exception to you."

She clambered up the ladder and peeped through the window. Then she leaned sideways and whispered down to Vivian who was cringing in the shadows.

"It's the maestro himself, sleeping like a newborn babe. He does look a ducky. Don't worry if I'm rather a long time. I shall only be discussing the development of English Poetic Tragedy."

Ten minutes later Rose appeared at the window and climbed out on to the ladder. It was a hazardous business, for she was now hampered by a bulky suitcase.

"What the devil is all this?" muttered Vivian as she handed the case down to him. "Have you a cabin-trunk as well?"

Rose dusted herself off, panting heavily. "Stop chattering and help me to put this ladder back where it came from. It's time we were getting out of here."

"Steady yourself," said Vivian who was now feeling quite brave. "There's no hurry."

"On the contrary." She jerked her thumb towards the bedroom window. "The Bard is getting restless: reciting Shakespeare in his sleep. When I passed the bed he reared himself up and said, 'Out damned spot!'"

In due course they reached the café. Vivian heaved the suitcase on to the back seat of the Aston-Martin with a grunt of relief.

"Thank God for that! I'd no idea that a typewriter was so heavy. Just about dragged my arms out at the socket."

Rose settled herself at the wheel. "I expect it's the other stuff that makes the weight. The machine is quite a small portable."

Vivian recoiled violently, banging his head against the car roof. "The other stuff? What do you mean?"

"I had to bring some extra odds and ends along to make it look like a real burglary. If I'd only brought the typewriter they might have suspected something."

Vivian flung back the lid of the suitcase, disclosing, in addition to the main trophy, a magnificent pair of Sheffield-plate candelabra, a gold cigarette-box and a massive silver tray.

Rose lit a cigarette and eyed the contents of the suitcase with quiet satisfaction. "Rather a nice lot, don't you think? They'll come in very useful in our little home. The candelabra will look charming on the dining-room table. And I thought the cigarette-box would do for bride's gift to bridegroom."

## 13

A WEEK later, at eleven o'clock in the morning, Sir Roland Gander was anxiously pacing his study in Chestnut Square. On the opposite side of the room Evelyn Chancery was poised on the edge of his chair, twitching like an exposed nerve.

Louise came in with a portfolio under her arm. "Sorry I've kept you waiting, but I was tearing the town apart with Piers Gaveston last night, and I overslept. . . . All right, don't tell me! I can guess. They've come. I thought they would, as soon as you got back from Cornwall."

"Such a horrid rude letter," cried Evelyn. "I was so terribly upset that I couldn't eat a bite of breakfast. I jumped straight into the car and rushed up here like a mad thing. It's not the threats I object to so much as the damnable innuendoes about my parochial activities; so completely unjustified. The organ-loft is far too cramped, and the Rector took the lock off the vestry door years ago."

"Mine," said Sir Roland, "is a most offensive mixture of brutal sarcasm and personal abuse, the whole couched in particularly disgusting departmental jargon."

Louise seated herself at the desk. "Right. Let's have a look at them. This is where I reap my reward for forty-five minutes in a lily-pond, I hope."

Evelyn drew a cheap buff envelope from his breast pocket and handed it over between his finger-tips as if it were red-hot.

Louise drew out the sheet of typescript. "H'm . . . yes . . . two thousand five hundred pounds or else the full story of the disposal of your Aunt Emily, to the Greek currant merchant will be released to the British, Continental and American press . . . together with the identity of Uncle Ned . . . you will receive further instructions as to how the money is to be paid over . . .".

She nodded briskly. "Very business-like. And now yours, Rolo. Yes, I see. Much on the same lines. Two thousand pounds or otherwise the full story of The Hole in the Wall at Barcelona will be released . . . and so forth."

She rubbed her hands and opened the portfolio. "Now for the great moment. Gather round, and we'll see how these compare with the handwritten drafts."

There was an interval of extreme tension. Then Sir Roland straightened up with a grim smile.

"Exact copies and no mistake about it. You can relax, Evelyn. From now on we're fireproof."

Evelyn tottered back to his chair, dabbing at his temples with his Cologne-scented handkerchief.

"My God, what a relief. You're quite sure, Rolo, that this puts us in the clear?"

"Absolutely. These letters, together with the handwritten drafts, are irrefutable evidence; not to mention what Louise overheard on her reconnaissance the other night. The position is now stalenate. If we refuse to pay up, what can they do? They could release the scandal and ruin us, but they would go to gaol and have nothing to show for it."

"And what happens now? Do we summon them to appear before a general meeting? Or do we send a deputation to negotiate with them? Or what?"

"Don't worry about that. Louise has volunteered to handle the final settlement, and I, for one, am perfectly content that she should. She has managed the affair brilliantly so far, as I'm sure you'll agree. It would be both needless and foolish for us to intervene at this stage."

"Certainly," replied Evelyn. "That suits me. There's only one thing I want to do : see my solicitor at the earliest possible moment and cut that unspeakable young ruffian out of my will."

He turned to Louise. "And as for you, my dear, I really don't know what to say. I cannot hope to find words to express my gratitude for all you have done."

Louise tweaked his ear. "Don't give it a second thought. I'm only too happy to be of service to Uncle Ned. Besides, I'm working for myself as well, remember. Don't forget that I have my own private score to settle with Rupert Thorn."

"And I hope you settle it well and truly. I always knew that he was thoroughly depraved, degenerate and devoid of all moral sense, but I never thought he would sink to blackmailing his own next-of-kin. As I said to my poor sister : 'Jenny,' I said, 'you've foaled a wrong 'un, my gal. That boy of yours will come to no good.' You mark my words," I said, 'he'll disgrace the family, and like as not he'll finish up in gaol.'"

Louise opened her eyes very wide. "You really said that, Evelyn ? To his own mother ?"

"I did. And I've never seen any reason to revise my opinion."

"And what did she say ?"

"As a matter of fact, she told me to mind my own bloody business."

Louise sighed. "A mother's love is a wonderful thing, and covers the multitude of sins. However, we mustn't be too hard on Rupert. I think, perhaps, he's not so much vicious as just a little bit thoughtless. What he needs is a very sharp lesson to bring him to his senses."

"Precisely," said Sir Roland. "And Sophy, too. She's in this as well, remember."

Evelyn nodded reluctantly. "Of course. But I hope it won't be necessary to deal too hardly with Sophy. After all, she's not so young as she was, and . . ."

He stopped, gave an embarrassed hem-hem and blew his nose trombone fashion.

Louise patted his hand. "Don't worry, Evelyn. We shan't deal too hardly with either of them. I shall simply hold these draft-letters over their heads as a guarantee of their future good conduct."

"And now," said Sir Roland, "I think we all deserve a drink. Speaking for myself, these last days have been a very severe nervous strain, a regular nightmare, in fact. Thank God, it's all over. I feel a mild celebration is called for."

They moved to the drawing-room and he rang for champagne. Very soon a marked reaction from the past week's tension set in. After the third bottle both Evelyn and Sir Roland joined Louise on the sofa, where they sought to express their gratitude to her by every means at their disposal. When the manservant announced luncheon, they were all behaving very foolishly indeed.

By the end of the meal both the gentlemen were completely stabilised. Lounging over their cigars and brandy, they were reminiscing about the good old days. There was much fruity chuckling and jocular rib-

nudging ; a great deal of " Do you recall the time when . . ." and " I laugh myself silly when I remember how . . ." From time to time a distinctly maudlin note crept into the conversation, and the toast to absent friends was drunk with monotonous regularity.

Louise, sipping her coffee, listened with mounting amazement. It was clear that Rolo and Evelyn and their associates had scaled heights and plumbed depths of experience unknown to herself and her contemporaries. They had quaffed the cup of life to the very dregs, and then, with redoubled relish, swallowed the dregs as well.

Listening to their reminiscences was like reading the exploits of the Homeric heroes. There was the same impression of a more than human gusto and energy. There was also the same impression of a less than human callousness and sharp practice. If the members of Sophy's Circus had excelled in vigour and high spirits, they had fallen deplorably short on loyalty and esprit de corps.

Story after story indicated a shameless philosophy of every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost. Flagrant treacheries between so-called bosom friends were recounted with gleeful approval. Such phrases as " Bowled him a fast one, by Gad ! " and " Properly left her holding the baby, ha, ha ! " occurred with lamentable frequency. Indeed, as the spate of anecdotes rolled across the luncheon table, Louise ceased to be amused : instead, she was profoundly shocked.

Sir Roland reached again for the decanter and made a sweeping gesture with his cigar. " Aye me, those were the days. What a pack of young rascals we were, to be sure ! Upon my soul, it makes me feel years younger to talk over old times like this."

"Me too," agreed Evelyn. "Though I reckon we've all worn wonderfully well, considering."

"We certainly have : especially Sophy."

Evelyn smiled and rolled his brandy round his tongue. "My word, yes. What a gal ! You know, Rolo, this is a very naughty trick she's played on us, but somehow I can't bring myself to bear her any malice."

"Why, of course not, my dear chap. I'd have done the same thing myself, years ago, if only I'd had the sense to think of it."

"And so would I, Rolo. We've been damn slow, and that's a fact. But Sophy always was a smart girl."

"Too true, old boy. Trust her to show the way."

There was an interval whilst Evelyn tenderly lit a fresh cigar and replenished his balloon. Then he exhaled a cloud of smoke, leaned back and stared contemplatively at the ceiling

"You know, Rolo, I've been thinking . . ."

"Yes ? What's on your mind ?"

"I've been thinking, Rolo, that now Sophy *has* shown the way, there's no reason why we shouldn't—ah—follow it."

"What do you mean, Evelyn ?"

"Well, I look at it this way, Rolo. This blackmailing business has been a very great strain on all concerned : and I can't help feeling that we who have cleared the matter up should receive some recognition for our work. Minnie and Splasher and Ambrose and Theo. ought to be very grateful to us."

"I see your point, Evelyn. You have something there."

"At the moment we are the only ones who know the identity of the guilty parties and have proof of it."

"Very true."

"Well, it occurs to me that the others might like to know, too. But I fail to see why they should receive the information—er—free of charge. We all have to live."

There was a pregnant silence. Then Sir Roland placed his hand on Evelyn's shoulder.

"I always thought you were a highly intelligent man, Evelyn. Now I'm sure of it. What were you thinking of asking?"

"Personally, I'm content to be guided by Sophy in this, as in all other matters. She, according to Louise, has assessed them at five thousand five hundred inclusive. I suggest we stick to the same scale of fees. After all, we don't want to be unreasonable."

Sir Roland nodded, and turned in his chair. "What do you feel, Louise? Do you think that's a fair price? Good gracious me! My dear child! Whatever is the matter?"

He gaped in amazement at Louise who had risen to her feet, her face flushed, her eyes flashing angrily.

"What do I think? I'll tell you what I think. I think it's the most disgusting, dirty, underhand trick I've ever heard of—and that you two are the damndest pair of double-dealing old ruffians I've ever come across. So there!"

"But, my dear girl! This is fantastic. It's——"

"Don't my-dear-girl me. You make me sick."

Evelyn tossed his head and primly fingered his tie. "I must confess, Louise, that I am completely at a loss to understand the meaning of this extraordinary outburst. I can only suppose that the strain of the past week has upset your nerves. I will only say that I am hurt, very hurt indeed."

At this, Louise slowly sat down again and leaned across the table. "It seems that the pair of you find

some difficulty in grasping my meaning. Very well, I'll explain. I came to your assistance in this affair because I was genuinely sorry for you both. It seemed to me that you were the unfortunate victims of a ruthless and unprovoked attack. Accordingly, I made up my mind to do all I could to help you. And, though I say it myself, I did a hell of a lot."

She stopped to draw breath, and then resumed with increasing indignation. "And what do I find? As soon as I've got you out of your difficulties, you immediately turn round and propose to play exactly the same dirty trick on other people—people, moreover, who are supposed to be your lifelong friends. Friends, indeed! You don't know the meaning of the word. For the past two hours I've been sitting here listening to your revolting reminiscences, and I've had my eyes opened I can tell you. It's been like—like lunching in a snake-pit."

She turned on Evelyn, who was bridling like an outraged dowager. "And as for you, you're the worst of the lot. Holding forth about the iniquities of your nephew when all the time you're nothing but a shameless old rogue yourself. Believe me, compared with you Rupert Thorn is a sucking-dove."

She jumped to her feet and snatched up her portfolio. "I've finished with the pair of you. From now on you can handle this thing yourselves."

Sir Roland rushed towards her as she made for the door. "But, Louise! Those draft letters! They're the vital clue!"

She crushed the portfolio to her bosom and stamped her foot. "No you don't. I got these, and I'm keeping them. I've told you once, and I tell you again, from now on you can look after yourselves."

The door slammed. There was a prolonged hush. At last Evelyn sighed and shook his head.

"Between ourselves, Rolo, I frankly admit that, I just don't understand the present generation. They seem to have no sense of proportion."

Louise had scarcely got back to her own flat when Rose Petal walked into the sitting-room.

"I hope you're not busy, Louise. I must have a talk with you immediately. It's urgent."

She settled herself in an armchair and dragged fiercely at her cigarette. "It's about this anonymous letter business. Have Rolo and Evelyn heard anything more?"

"Yes. They both received threatening letters this morning, demanding a lot of money or else."

"Just what I expected. The same goes for Minnie and Splasher and Ambrose. And what I've come to tell you is this: I know who is responsible. It's Rupert Thorn and this fabulous woman we've been hearing so much about, Sophy Cleft. You don't seem much surprised."

"Press on. I'm listening."

"All right. It's a long story, but I won't bore you with the details. Briefly, I tracked them down and found them lurking in a country house in the village of Malmsey Hautboys. I reconnoitred the position and gathered enough evidence to fix them a fair treat. To be precise, I broke into the house and stole the typewriter on which the letters were written."

"Nice work, Rose. I congratulate you."

"Thank you. But it's not that part of the story I'm concerned with at the moment. It's the sequel that I've come to see you about. I've just been attending a sort of victory luncheon with my syndicate: you

know, celebrating the downfall of the enemy and deciding how to make the best use of our advantage."

"I know exactly what you mean."

Rose's jaw stiffened and the blood mounted to her cheeks. "I doubt if you do know what I mean, Louise. The celebrations took a rather unexpected turn."

"I can hardly wait."

"Well, during luncheon, the three of them started reminiscing about old times. You never heard such atrocious revelations. I'm not unduly encumbered with moral scruples myself, but listening to those three fairly made my hair stand on end. It wasn't their frolics and capers that upset me. Some of those were quite amusing. What appalled me was their code of personal relations. I tell you, Louise, they're like so many wild animals. Every man for himself and to hell with everyone else. If you find yourself in a tight corner you ditch your mates without a second thought."

Rose was on her feet, gesturing violently. "And what makes it ten times worse is their cheerful acceptance of it all. Hearty laughter all round and cries of 'Smart work, old boy!' and 'Jolly good luck to you, my girl!' It makes me sick".

She broke off, panting heavily. In due course she lit another cigarette and relaxed somewhat.

"Forgive that outburst. I'll now dismount from my orange-box and come to the point. They began talking about Sophy Clef, and, frankly, their attitude astounded me. They weren't in the least indignant with her for trying to blackmail them. They actually seemed to admire her enterprise. In fact they all agreed that they would have done the same thing themselves if only they'd had the sense to think of it. And then—well, really——"

"Yes? 'What?'"

"You'll scarcely believe it, but it's absolutely true. Minnie Blazer suggested that the three of them should follow Sophy Cleft's example. She pointed out that Evelyn and Rolo would probably be ready to pay an awful lot of money to know the source of the letters, and she proposed to sell the information to them for the same amount that Sophy was demanding, i.e. two thousand from Rolo Gander and two thousand five hundred from Evelyn Chancery. At that I properly blew my gaskets. I told them that they were a trio of dirty, treacherous, two-faced vultures, adding that I'd finished with them and that from now on they could deal with Sophy Cleft themselves. Thereupon I swept out, jumped straight into the car and drove along here to let you know what's cooking. And I've brought that precious typewriter with me."

She flung herself down in her chair and faced Louise. "Well? What do you think of it? You don't seem much disturbed, I must say."

"No, I'm not, and for the simple reason that I've just experienced exactly the same thing myself."

"Louise!"

"Yes. My story is a replica of yours. I, too, located Rupert and Sophy. I, too, secured vital evidence: in my case the hand-written drafts of the letters. I, too, have just attended a victory luncheon where my clients have proposed precisely the same sporting little gesture as yours."

For several minutes they discussed the moral characters of Sophy's Circus. Their findings were unanimous and blistering. When they had exhausted their righteous indignation, there was a meditative pause. Then Louise tapped her companion on the knee.

"By the way, Rose, I don't want to seem small-minded, but I have been rather hurt by *your* behaviour in this affair. It wasn't very nice of you to go off hunting on your own like that, was it? I mean to say, we've always done everything together and shared all our secrets. I can't imagine why you should bypass your old trace-mate like this, unless .

Rose blushed and looked away. "As a matter of fact, Louise, I have felt rather badly about it. But I was thinking of Vivian."

"Really? How does he come into it?"

"Well, as I'm going to marry the chap, I naturally want him to make good. I thought that if I handled this thing myself I could pass all the credit to Vivian, and then General Grönmit would be ever so grateful to him and forward his promotion."

"I see. You always were a self-sacrificing little thing. Very praiseworthy, I'm sure."

There was an uncomfortable silence. Then suddenly Rose sat up and pointed an accusing forefinger.

"You sarcastic bitch! What about yourself? Why did *you* go off hunting on your own without *me*?"

At this Louise was so taken aback that she blushed herself. "Well, really, Rose, I don't see what that has to do with the matter. If you must know, I had very special private reasons for acting as I did : reasons which I am not at liberty to disclose. I——"

Rose interrupted her with a burst of laughter. "All right, Lucy, my pet. You don't have to perjure yourself puce in the face. I know very well why you went off on your own. You wanted to secure the exclusive rights in that repugnant poet."

"My dear girl, I——"

"Don't bother to make excuses. He's all yours."

From now on 'I intend to cleave unto Vivian Handspike like a besotted mollusc."

"Good gracious me! How very extraordinary."

"I know, but that's the way it is. He did something the other night which completely won my heart."

"My dear, I'm delighted to hear it. How much did he settle on you?"

"Don't be so worldly, Louise. It has nothing to do with his money. It's his character. Do you know, when we were breaking into Malmsey Close to get that typewriter, he volunteered to go up the ladder first."

"He did? Darling, I congratulate you. You've picked a winner and no mistake about it! Just what I always say: they turn out *men* in the Venerable Company of Bombardiers."

They celebrated their reconciliation in pink gin, a drink which, they agreed, was flavoured with poignant memories for both of them. Then Rose got up to go.

"Well, it was fun whilst it lasted; but this is the end of the matter so far as I'm concerned. Sophy's Circus will have to work out their own destinies without any more advice from me. I've finished with the lot of them."

"I think," said Louise, "that I shall carry my investigations a little further. For one thing, I want to make the acquaintance of the celebrated Sophy. For another, I want to<sup>s</sup>—"

"Quite," said Rose, making for the door. "But I think you should wait until I'm married before you tell me about that."

At five p.m. Rupert was lying on the sofa in the drawing-room at Malmsey Close busily revising *The Jetman's Revenge*. He was alone in the house, for Sophy and Adolphe had gone to play croquet at the Rectory, and the maid had the afternoon off.

The blinds were drawn against the evening sunshine, and in the hot flower-scented silence Rupert was working at maximum concentration. His spectacle-frames rode askew on his nose, his hair hung down to his eyes, his pipe was seething like a witch's cauldron. As he hacked away at the typescript with his fountain-pen, he muttered and grumbled to himself continuously, occasionally breaking out into a torrent of oaths.

For several moments Louise stood in the doorway, watching him. Then she stepped into the room.

"Good afternoon. May I come in?"

"What? Yes, of course. Have a cup of tea."

He answered her like one in a trance. His eyes remained fixed on his manuscript. His right hand continued to wield the pen without an instant's intermission. His left hand waved vaguely towards the tea-wagon by the sofa.

Louise crossed the room, lowered herself into an adjacent armchair and poured herself a cup of Orange Pekoe. She was about to raise the cup to her lips when a sheaf of typescript shot into her lap.

"Sort that lot out, will you? The pages are all awry-tarsy. I don't know whether I'm coming or going."

This was too much for Louise. Leaning forward,

she made a trumpet of her hands and approached her mouth to Rupert's right ear. Then, taking a deep breath, she shouted with all her might.

"WAKEY! WAKEY!"

At this, Rupert, together with all his kit, soared into the air and bounced back upon the sofa with a bitter thud.

"Good God! Louise!"

"Good afternoon."

"Er—good afternoon."

"You're still very busy with your poetical drama, I see."

"Er—yes. Very busy indeed. I'm just obfuscating a bit."

"I beg your pardon."

"Mucking it about so that nobody will be able to make sense of it."

"Could anyone make sense of it before?"

"Hubert Derrick, who's going to put the thing on, says he's detected an unmistakable story in it. So I've got to obfus——"

"Don't keep saying that. It sounds so rude. I must apologise, by the way, for interrupting you at your work. I seem to make a habit of it."

"Don't mention it. A pleasure, I assure you.. I've nearly finished, anyhow. Quite a simple job. Just a matter of switching all the main parts around. In the revised version the test-pilot speaks the frustrated nun's lines, and she speaks the communistic industrialist's line, and he speaks the honest prostitute's lines. That should fill the bill, I think—and the theatre"

Louise, meanwhile was watching him closely. He was now, she suspected, playing for time. Under his customary smooth aplomb there was a distinct hint of

wariness and uncertainty. She decided to let him make the running and returned to her cup of tea.

For some moments Rupert busied himself sorting out his belongings. Then he swung around on the sofa with a flashing grin.

"Well, that's that. And now I can receive you in proper style. May I say how delighted I am by this altogether unexpected pleasure?"

"Unexpected, no doubt."

"Would it be impertinent to ask how you traced—how you ascertained my address?"

"Via Commander Lanyard, Shamus Skindle, Mark Hanker, your spectacles, and the name on the dog-collar."

"You are a very tenacious and observant young woman."

"Very."

Rupert got up and began to pace the carpet, his chin sunk on his bosom. Finally he came to rest on the piano-stool.

"H'm, h'm. Well, I suppose there's no point in beating about the bush. I take it you've put two and two together and made five?"

"Yes."

"Got any evidence? My question is a purely academic one, of course."

"Your hand-written drafts of the letters."

"Whooooosh! And the typewriter?"

"No. Rose got that."

"May I ask how you—"

"I shouldn't if I were you. I'm still rather sensitive about it."

Rupert carefully filled his pipe. He took a very long time about it.

"There's just one thing I should like to make quite clear. This is my affair entirely."

"Meaning what?"

"That Sophy has no part in it. I devised the scheme and organised it. If your clients decide to—er—prosecute, then they can confine their attentions to me. In any case it would be very difficult to pin anything on to Sophy. Those draft letters are in my handwriting, and——"

"Am I to understand that you are casting yourself in the role of the self-sacrificing hero?"

"I am. But please avoid harping on the fact. It makes me feel so silly."

"I can imagine that."

"Er—have you any idea what they propose to do?"

Louise put down her cup. "Perhaps I, too, should make one point quite clear. It is not a question of what *they* propose. It is a question of what I propose. Any decision in this matter will be taken by me alone."

"By you? But what about Sir Roland Gander and——"

"I've finished with them, and so has Rose. We have both taken grave exception to their moral outlook, and we've deprived them of our assistance, along with all the evidence in the case."

"How very extraordinary. And now?"

"Rose has dropped the whole thing. She's sick to death of it, and has decided to concentrate all her energies on marrying Vivian Handspike."

"And you?"

"I have *not* dropped the whole thing."

"Ah! I was afraid of that. Well, as I said before, I can only request you to leave Sophy out of your plans, because——"

"By all means. Sophy Cleft and her friends can settle their own affairs. They can blackmail one another to their hearts' content, or slit each other's throats, for all I care."

"Then I can only conclude that you are now directing all your attention to—er—me."

"Correct. I can see that it is not for nothing that you habitually smoke a Sherlock Holmes pipe."

There was another prolonged silence. At last Rupert moistened his lips and uttered in a voice markedly less fruity than usual.

"May I enquire what you have in mind?"

"Certainly. I simply intend to do to you what you have expressed your intention of doing to me."

"Really, I——"

"And in case you feel argumentative, let me remind you that I am in possession of certain letters, together with the author's drafts in his own handwriting. Hubert Derrick is a very enterprising impresario, I know, but I scarcely think that even he would be eager to associate with a playwright who was guilty of attempted blackmail."

Rupert groped for the sofa and slowly subsided.

"I see. Well? What is it? Money, I suppose. Though I can't remember that I ever intended to blackmail *you*. However, I'm not so young as I was, and my memory isn't all that it might be."

"Then let me refresh it for you. The other night you caused me to lie flat on my belly in a lily-pond for three-quarters of an hour, with a host of water voles where it was both unnecessary and inconvenient. That is not the best position for recording other people's small-talk; but I have a vivid impression that on more than one occasion you expressed your

intention of putting me in my place and keeping me there."

She rose to her feet and stood over him, her hands on her hips, her eyes sparking.

"Well, the boot is now on the other foot, as the saying goes. It is now *my* intention 'to put *you* in *your* place—and keep you there. And that without further delay."

Rupert was completely disorganised, unnerved by her antagonism, bewildered by her uncrests, dizzied by the proximity of her warm, scented charms."

"But I don't understand. Put me in my place. . . . What on earth are you getting at? I can't imagine."

"You can't? Then all I can say is this: for a poet you're deplorably short on psychological insight."

With this, she swung around and flung out her arm in an imperious gesture, pointing through the drawing-room doorway to the rising curve of the stairway.

"Up there! And sharpish!"

Supine and parallel in the aftermath of battle.

"All right?"

"My word, yes."

"Good. At any moment now I shall propose to you."

"Obliged, I'm sure. But can you really spare the time from obfuscating?"

"No. But I have a tidy mind, and I feel that our position should be regularised."

"Ooooooh, how lovely. I've never tried that one."

"Are you ready?"

"No. Half a second whilst I find my lipstick."

"Hurry up. I can feel it coming on."

"All right. Ready now."

"Very well. Listen carefully. I shall count up to five, slowly and rhythmically, timing myself by the second-hand of this watch. I shall then ask you to marry me. And I shall await the favour of your esteemed reply at your earliest convenience. Is that quite clear?"

"Yes, Rupert."

"Right, then. Off we go! One—two—three—"

"YES!"

"What's that you say? I do wish you wouldn't interrupt, Louise. Now we shall have to start all over again."

"I said yes."

"Yes what?"

"Yes, I will marry you."

"I see. Then allow me to congratulate you upon a very wise decision. An old head on young shoulders, indeed."

Louise made no reply. She plucked meditatively at her lower lip, her brows knitted in concentration.

"What's wrong? You appear to have something on your mind. Something else, that is."

"Yes. I have a feeling we've forgotten something."

"Oh, surely not?"

"Yes, I'm positive there's something. I know! A ring."

"A what?"

"A ring, Rupert. You must give me one instantly. Otherwise we shan't be regular."

"I say, how very mortifying. Is it really necessary?"

"Certainly it is. You should read the women's magazines. There's hell on earth about rings."

"Then you'd better have mine. Here you are."

"But that's not the drill, darling."

"Good God Almighty, Louise, what are you nattering about now?"

"You have to put it on for me. Here, on this o.e. Third finger, left hand."

"Are you quite sure? It looks damn silly to me."

"Absolutely. I read all about it last week in *Young Wives' Tales*. And then I flaunt it regardless in front of all the girls at the office who promptly turn pale green and redouble their assaults on the junior partner."

"All right, then. There. And before you think up any more of these extraordinary tribal rituals, I'll just go and get a bottle of gin. The strain of regularising has seriously undermined my constitution."

He paused in the doorway and turned about.

"By the way, I've just remembered something, too. A couple of items I've been meaning to mention to you for quite some time."

"Yes? What?"

"(a) That you are the most beautiful thing that ever was, and (b) that I love you like—like——"

"Like what? Go on. Have a bash."

"I'm sorry, I can't. Words fail me."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said words fail me."

"Thank you, Rupert. Thank you very much indeed. Coming from you, that's the nicest compliment I have ever received."

He disappeared into the corridor. A moment later he was back again.

"About that ring, Louise. It's a family heirloom and I feel rather undressed without it. So perhaps you'd be good enough to get one of your own as soon as possible."

It was after midnight when Louise made ready to leave. Standing beside her car on the drive, Rupert looked up at the stars and sighed.

"You know, there's only one fly in the ointment of my present bliss. I can't help worrying about poor Sophy. Now that this little scheme has fallen apart, she'll be very awkwardly placed, I'm afraid. From what I can make out, she's terribly short of money, and she has such expensive tastes. I feel as if I'm rather leaving her in the lurch."

Louise patted his hand. "Don't worry about that. I've taken a very strong fancy to Sophy Cleft. She gave me some wonderful advice after dinner about the basic principles of man-management. I shall make it my business to see that her future is assured."

"Very kind of you. But I fail to see what you can do."

Louise settled herself at the wheel and started the motor. "I've a notion that I can do quite a lot if I go about it in the right way. I've told you already that Rose and I have both agreed to suppress all the evidence in this case. That leaves Sophy a free agent. And so long as she is that, I don't think the rest of the Circus will find much joy in life."

She blew him a kiss and engaged the clutch.

"Farewell, life of my soul. I must fly. I want to catch Sir Roland Gander before he goes to bed, and point out to him where his best interests lie."

MINNIE BLAZER, Splasher Grummit, Ambrose Bannister and Theo Crozier were sitting in a tense semi-circle facing Sir Roland Gander, who was standing behind his desk, his arms folded on his chest. “

“Right. We’ll get down to business at once, because there is little time to spare. I’m expecting Evelyn Chancery here at eleven o’clock, and I have a good deal to say to you before he arrives. You’ll find whisky and cigarettes on the table behind you. Help yourselves.” “ ”

When the initial gulping and inhaling had died down, Sir Roland resumed.

“I have called you together this morning for one reason, and one reason only : that we may unite our forces in a final effort to avert the catastrophe which still threatens us. And when I say ‘unite our forces’ I mean it. From now on there must be no reservations, no seeking after private interest. If we are to succeed we must all place our cards on the table and pull together as a team. I hope I make myself quite clear.”

Under his cold, penetrating stare, his audience shifted uneasily in their seats.

“Good. I will not labour the point. And now for the facts. Yesterday we all suffered a grievous shock and a bitter disappointment. It seemed that we were at last in possession of enough evidence to neutralise Rupert Thorn and Sophy Cleft for good and all. Then, for reasons—ah—best known to themselves, Louise Gale and Rose Petal decided to suppress all that

evidence and discontinue their assistance in the case. Thereby they have left us completely unprotected and again exposed to the malicious attacks of our opponents."

He was interrupted by a volley of indignant exclamations.

"Too bloody true. Absolutely disgraceful. Crass ingratitude, no less."

"Typical of the present generation. No sense of sportsmanship. No team spirit."

"A sad case of that perverted moral outlook which inevitably follows upon the absence of sound religious instruction."

"Take their drawers down, that's what I'd do, and warm their bottoms with a good strong hairbrush."

Sir Roland held up his hand. "If you please. There is nothing to be gained by losing our tempers. If we are to deal with this situation successfully, we must face it in a calm and orderly manner."

He grasped his lapels and threw his weight back on his heels in his celebrated Treasury Bench attitude. "That, briefly, was the position yesterday afternoon. Since then, however, certain new developments have taken place. Last night I received an unexpected visit from Louise Gale. I won't pretend that it was a very cordial meeting, but she did see fit to put ~~me in~~ possession of some vital information."

"For God's sake get a move on, Rolo," snapped Miss Blazer. "It's not question time in the Commons, now."

"Very well, then. First: Louise is going to marry Rupert Thorn. Yes, yes, I know it's incredible, but it is true nonetheless. Furthermore, she has given me an absolute guarantee that we shall have no more trouble out of *him*."

There was a concerted gasp of relief, followed by a puzzled silence. Then General Grummit leaned forward and tapped the desk.

"So much for young 'Thorn. And a good job, too. But what about Sophy?"

Sir Roland nodded grimly. "Precisely. What about Sophy?"

"You mean that she intends to go on with this diabolical attack upon us?"

"It is possible, I'm afraid; even probable. Louise and Rose are determined to withhold all the evidence. That means that Sophy is still an absolutely free agent. We have no hold upon her whatsoever. If she chooses, she can resume her campaign against us at any moment."

"But surely she'd never do that," protested Ambrose Bannister. "Not on her own."

"According to Louise, she is fully prepared to do so if necessary. I understand that she is extremely short of money and has already sold most of her valuables. That was why she launched her attack anonymously. She didn't want us to know that she was reduced to such straits."

"Well, we know now."

"Exactly. And that is where the danger lies. Her wounded vanity is likely to drive her to the most savage excesses. She has nothing to lose and all to gain. Louise asserts that Sophy is now in a mood to drop all pretence and go for us tooth and claw, unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Unless," said Sir Roland, speaking with the weightiest emphasis, "we can persuade Evelyn Chancery to marry her."

"What! Have you gone mad!"

"Evelyn Chancery marry! Why, it's sheerest fantasy."

"If this is intended as a joke, Rolo, I'm afraid I don't share your sense of the ridiculous."

"I tell you, Rolo, that it would be easier to persuade a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than to induce Evelyn Chancery to enter into the bonds of matrimony."

Sir Roland's jaw hardened. "Very well. If that's your attitude there's nothing more to be said. But let me tell you this: it's our last chance and our only chance. You can take it or leave it."

"I can't imagine how you ever thought of such a fantastic scheme," protested General Grummit. "And only a few minutes ago you were lecturing us about facing the facts."

"It is not my idea," snapped Sir Roland. "It is Louise Gale's suggestion. She dined with Sophy last night and had a long talk with her. Nothing definite was said, of course; but Louise came away with this clear understanding: if we can persuade Evelyn to marry Sophy and provide a secure future for her, she will call off her campaign and leave us in peace. She was always crazy about him, as we very well know. She is even crazier about him now, because he needs his money as well."

"Money! But that has always been Evelyn's objection to getting married. He could never find a wife rich enough to support him in the style to which he is accustomed."

"That excuse holds good no longer. In fact, Evelyn is now potentially a very rich man indeed. It may surprise you to know that he is television's Uncle Ned."

In due course the uproar subsided and the company settled down with replenished glasses.

"Well," said General Grummit, "I don't know what to think, I really don't. But it seems to me that this is just about our last chance, as Roio says. After all, we can but try. It's five against one. We ought to be able to bring a fair weight of pressure to bear."

Minnie Blazer drained her glass and rose to her feet. "I second that. It's ridiculous that our entire future should be jeopardised by the childish obstinacy of Evelyn Chancery. I, for one, am not prepared to stand any nonsense. He will agree to marry Sophy Cleft without delay, or it won't be my fault."

They were interrupted by a knock on the door. "Mr. Evelyn Chancery, sir. He says you are expecting him."

Sir Roland turned to his colleagues with a grim smile. "Well? You wish to see him? Good. Then we'll have him up. And I would suggest that we take a very strong line from the outset."

An hour later Evelyn was standing at bay by the filing cabinet. His hair was rumpled, his cheeks were flushed. There was the gleam of panic in his eye, and he was panting heavily. But the spirit of the Chancerys was still unbroken. Deaf to cajolery, impervious to threats, he was defending his bachelor status with unshaken resolution.

Sir Roland gathered himself for a fresh assault. Elbowing the others aside, he stalked right up to his prey, jabbed a forefinger in his chest and took a deep preliminary breath. But Evelyn forestalled him. Suddenly, without warning, he turned upon his tormentors

like a hunted animal, Thrusting his fingers into his ears, he backed up against the wall and angrily stamped his foot.

"I won't listen to any more!" he cried. "I won't listen, I tell you. You can bully me as much as you like, but it won't do any good. My mind is made up, and nothing you can say will alter it. I will NOT marry Sophy Cleft, or anyone else, so there."

Seeing that his counter-attack had reduced his enemies to silence, he withdrew his fingers from his ears and folded his arms.

"Now, listen to me. I am a mild and patient man, but I am neither a weakling nor a fool. I fully agree that the best way to neutralise Sophy Cleft would be for me to marry her. But I'm just not prepared to sacrifice myself for your convenience. Oh, I know what you're going to say. You're going to tell me that it would be in my own interest as well. Up to a point, yes. But so far as I am concerned, this is a choice between two evils. And I have made that choice for good and all. To put the matter in a nutshell: I would sooner pay blackmail for the rest of my life than commit myself to marriage."

He crossed to the table and poured himself a glass of neat whisky which he disposed of in two gulps. Then he perched himself on the edge of the desk.

"During the past sixty years I have developed a way of life perfectly adapted to my temperament. Its keystones are Order, Moderation, Tranquillity. I ask little enough: good books, good music, good wine, a little civilised frivolity from time to time, and leisure to reflect upon the follies of mankind. No more. But that little is very dear to me, and I am prepared to die in the last ditch in its defence."

There was a thwarted silence. Then Sir Roland swung around and nodded to Minnie Blazer, who had so far remained rigid in her chair, saturating herself with fire-water.

The chair creaked ominously as she levered her fifteen stone of bone and gristle upright. Evelyn, who was gazing loosely out of the window, heard the movement and sensed the sudden tension in the atmosphere. He turned his head sharply, then, in an instant, dodged behind the desk.

Minnie was advancing upon him with the implacable menace of a cruiser tank. As she moved across the carpet she spoke in a low clear monotone, all the more alarming for its complete lack of emotion.

"So you won't marry her, eh? So, your mind is made up and nothing will alter it. We'll see about that, you smug, smirking, self-centred little whipper-snapper. And if I can't alter your mind for you, I'll damn well alter something else."

She leaned across the desk and thrust her face into Evelyn's, enveloping him in a fog of alcohol.

"Just you listen to me, Evelyn Chancery. I've had more than enough nonsense out of you this morning, and I don't intend to stand any more. You'll agree to marry Sophy Cleft, or—that perishing village choir of yours will have another soprano."

There was a shrill cry of alarm, a frantic flurry of limbs, and Evelyn shot through the doorway like a panic-stricken gazelle, with Minnie lumbering in the rear.

For the space of several minutes the flat resounded, with galloping feet, agonised yelps, the slamming of doors and the crash of overturned furniture. Then, suddenly, there was complete silence.

Presently Minnie re-entered the study and dropped, panting, into her armchair.

"Well?" demanded Sir Roland. "Have you made him see reason?"

"Have I hell! The little devil's as nimble as a mountain-goat. He tripped me arse-over-tip with the fire-tongs, dodged down the corridor, and locked himself in the W.C."

Sir Roland stood motionless in the middle of the room, his hands locked behind his back, his chin sunk on his bosom. At last he raised his head and faced his dejected colleagues.

"My friends, it is high time that this affair was settled, once and for all. It is clear that *we* cannot persuade Evelyn to marry Sophy. Therefore we shall have to put ourselves in the hands of someone who can."

Ambrose Bannister vented a bitter snort. "I don't know what you mean by that, Rolo. But I tell you this: there's only one person I can think of who could deal with Evelyn in his present mood, and that's the——"

"Exactly, Ambrose," replied Sir Roland, reaching for the telephone.

## 16

“ . . . and in future, Junior Ministers, in their public utterances, will restrict themselves to inspiring platitudes and happy restatements of the obvious . . . Eh ? What ? ”

“ Mr. Evelyn Chancery, sir. He was to see you at eleven o'clock.”

“ Chancery ? Evelyn Chancery ? ”

“ Yes, sir. That little matter of Sir Roland Gander and the anonymous letters.”

“ Oh, yes. Send him in. And bring some more cigars. This may take a little time.”

EVELYN stopped the motor, got out of the car and slowly approached the front door of Malmsey Close. He moved like one hypnotised, as if impelled by some relentless exterior force.

He hesitated for a moment, then raised his finger to the bell-push. As he did so, his mind cleared. He was abruptly released from the spell which had possessed him since the momentous interview of five hours ago.

His arm fell to his side, and he took a pace backwards from the threshold. He suddenly realised, with a terrifying clarity, what the pressing of that button would mean. It would sound the death-knell of a mode of life fashioned with untold care and calculated selfishness over a period of sixty years. And it would ring up the curtain upon . . . who could say what? Tragedy, melodrama, knockabout farce? Marriage to Sophy might well turn out to be any of those; or, worse, a mixture of all three.

He took another pace backward. He was not committed yet. There was still time to retreat. A vision of the ordered calm and modest luxury of his home at Monk's Frisking flashed across his mind's eye. He half-turned towards his car. Then, simultaneously, the celebrated fruity growl of five hours ago sounded in his mind's ear.

"You and your friends, Chancery, are national figures of the first magnitude: Sir Roland Gander, a Cabinet Minister; General Grummit, Director of Interplanetary Warfare; Miss Blazer, Minister of

Education, elec. ; the Bishop of Elmbury and Mr. Ambrose Bannister, eminent representatives of religion and the arts ; and, last but not least, yourself, as Uncle Ned, a potent influence for the promotion of stability and sanity in every household in the realm. If these scandals are released, incalculable damage to our national life will inevitably follow, including, even, the fall of the present Government. . . . Chancery, the remedy lies in your hands, and yours alone. . . . You must do this thing, you *will* do this thing : not for your friends, not for yourself, not even for me, but for England ! ”

Evelyn took two sharp paces forward and pressed the bell.

Presently the parlour maid returned. Miss Cleft was in the garden. He was ushered through the drawing-room towards the french windows. Suddenly he stopped dead, dismissing the maid with a vague wave of the hand. He stood motionless, staring out on to the lawn.

Sophy was sitting in the swing-seat idly turning the pages of a glossy magazine.

Her beauty and her elegance pierced him like a rapier in the heart. Thirty years fell from him, and he was back on the terrace of Ambrose Bannister's house in Elmshire. There it was that he had seen her for the first time, and in just this self-same attitude : sitting in profile, exhibiting that exquisite classic jaw-line and that ravishing little nose ; aboosly withdrawn into that mysterious private world to which he had never gained admittance. The hair was now as dazzlingly white as it had then been fabulously golden ; but the limbs had still their slim, fine-boned fragility. And the hands, turning the pages of the magazine,

were still the fastidious precision instruments of a dedicated surgeon of amour.

He staggered a little and supported himself against the back of an armchair. He was overwhelmed, but his mind was illuminated by a brilliant radiance of understanding. He knew now exactly what he was going to do, and why. He was going to ask Sophy Cleft to marry him : not for the benefit of his friends, not for the welfare of his native land, but because, quite simply, he was in love with her, and had been these last thirty years.

She looked up and saw him crossing the lawn with that quick, poised step she remembered so well ; the perfection of his grooming relieved, as always, by a subtle touch of careless rapture.

" My dear Sophy ! After all these long, long years."

" Good afternoon, Evelyn. This is indeed a pleasant surprise."

He bowed over her hand and pressed his lips to her fingers. " How well you look. Younger than ever, and twice as beautiful."

With the dexterity of a conjuror he produced a sheaf of Catalonia roses and presented them with a flourish.

" A few poor flowers ; a humble token of my affection and esteem."

" My favourites, Evelyn. How charming of you to remember."

" How should I forget ? I always used to think that they would clash with the blue of your eyes ; but, by some miracle, they never did."

She held the flowers to her face and gave him a paralysing smile across the flame-pink petals. " And does the miracle still work ? "

"To-day, my dear Sophy, no miracle is needed. Beside your eyes, roses cease to exist."

"Nicely spoken, Evelyn. As smooth as ever, and even less convincing. You'll stay to tea, of course?"

She motioned him to the vacant corner of the swing-seat. Whilst he lit his cigar, she eyed him expertly. For a man of sixty, his rig was dangerously juvenile: a silk shirt with a loose neckerchief, grey flannel trousers and desert boots. But he got away with it, she decided. The crisp, abundant hair was now completely grey, but the body was as lean and supple as ever. 'She caught the familiar discreet bouquet of French Fern and costly tobacco.

He glanced up. "Well? Do I pass? I'm still quite warm and mobile, you know . . . apart from a rather attractive little limp in damp weather. Not rheumatism, I hasten to assure you: just a keepsake from the abominable Hun."

"Quite. And a lot of fancy ribbons to go with it, I hear. Surely you were a fraction over age for all that sort of nonsense?"

"Oh, there are ways and means. A bottle of hair dye and a push from Splasher Grummit did the trick."

"Ah, yes. Dear Splasher. How is he? And all the rest of them?"

"Physically, I'm happy to say, they are all in an excellent state of preservation. Mentally, I fancy, they are a little perturbed just at present. However, we all have our worries."

"How true."

There was a considerable pause. Evelyn watched her out of the corner of his eye. She was lying back against the cushions, completely relaxed, pensively

sniffing one of the roses he had brought her. He remained silent, smiling a little to himself, delighted by the old imperturbable self-possession.

Finally she turned towards him with raised eyebrows. "Well, Evelyn? You're not very sociable this afternoon. But then, perhaps, this isn't a social visit."

"What else should it be?"

"I thought, it might be something in the nature of a business call."

"Well, I suppose it is, in a sense. Shall we say a combination of business with pleasure?"

"Yes, let's. It sounds more civilised."

The silence settled down again. Sophy scrutinised him with undisguised amusement. The customary Chancery aplomb was clearly ruffled. The fingers holding the cigar were trembling slightly. The toes were atwilt under the thin suede of the boots.

"I don't want to disturb your meditations, Evelyn, but it will soon be tea-time, and meals and business are best kept apart. Shall we press on? It occurs to me that you may have some—er—proposition to lay before me."

The ash fell off his cigar. "As a matter of fact, I have, Sophy. Not so much a proposition as a—a proposal."

"How you diplomatists love to play with words."

"I am not playing with words. I am simply striving after accuracy. What I have to lay before you, Sophy, is indeed a proposal: a proposal of marriage."

She slowly raised the rose to her nostrils and profoundly inhaled. "I beg your pardon Evelyn. I didn't quite catch that last remark."

"Then I'll rephrase it more simply. Will—you—marry—me?"

"There's no need to bawl. I heard it that time, thank you."

"Well? How does it strike you?"

"It certainly makes a nice change from our usual routine."

He leaned across, tweaked the rose from her fingers, and dealt her the notorious Chancery grin.

"Delicious ravishment! As difficult as ever. Must I go down on my knees?"

"I shouldn't, Evelyn. It would be such a pity to spoil those beautiful trousers for nothing."

"Sophy! What the devil do you mean?"

"That it's my turn to say no. And not before time, either."

"But this is fantastic. I don't understand you. I——"

She answered his blank stare of amazement with a smile of heart-rending sweetness.

"Then I'll explain, Evelyn. Frankly, I'd love to marry you. I've wanted to all my life, as you very well know. And now that you're Uncle Ned, I'm more madly devoted to you than ever. But even I am not so shameless as to accept a proposal made under duress. I still have a little proper pride."

He was flabbergasted. She had refused him. And in a fashion that left no room for doubt. Half an hour ago he would have received her answer with heartfelt relief; but now it came as a stunning blow which left him dazed with bewilderment and despair. He pulled himself together with a supreme effort. There was only one thing for it: he would have to lie as he had never lied before.

He went into his act with the practised skill of a lifetime. He increased his wide-eyed stare of amazement

to a blank gape of imbecility. He recoiled against the cushions and dropped his cigar to the ground. Then he uttered on a cracked falsetto of astonishment.

"A proposal under duress! My dear Sophy, what on earth are you talking about? I haven't the slightest notion what you mean."

She opened her lips to launch a retort, then stopped and gave him a long, searching glance. Evelyn allowed his jaw to sag another half-inch, and forced his eyeballs still farther from their sockets.

She hesitated, then shrugged. "Either you are uncommonly dense, Evelyn, or else you are being rather tiresome. What I mean is this: that Rolo Gander, and the others have forced you into proposing to me, so that I shall stop pestering them."

"I never heard such a crazy suggestion in all my life. Moreover, it is one which I find most offensive. God knows I have my little weaknesses, but moral cowardice is not one of them, I flatter myself. If you suppose that Rolo Gander, or anyone else, could browbeat me into a course of action which I have carefully avoided for sixty years, then you are very much mistaken. I am not amused, Sophy; and I am deeply grieved that such a degrading suggestion should come from you, of all people."

He saw that he had shaken her considerably. She looked away from him, and when she spoke there was a distinct tremor in her voice.

"Am I really to understand, Evelyn, that Rolo and Co. have not mentioned this to you? That your proposal is a genuine one, all your own work?"

"I swear it, Sophy."

"Cross your heart, and with your hand on the Book?"

"Cross my heart, and with my hand on the collected works of Stendhal."

"Then, in that case, I believe you ; and I shall be delighted to accept your proposal."

A little later Evelyn was discoursing over the tea cups. "Now, as to the wedding, Theo. Crozier is clearly the man to do the job. Nothing less than a bishop would suit our style, I feel. And Elmbury Cathedral would make an appropriately impressive setting. I think I shall ask Ambrose Bannister to be my best man ; and I suggest that it might be the civil thing to ask Minnie Blazer to be one of your bridesmaids."

"My dear Evelyn, aren't you rather flying to extremes ? Are you really contemplating a full-scale affair with all the trimmings ?"

"Certainly. We Chancerys always do things in the grand manner."

"I see. And I suppose you're expecting me to traipse around in a long white gown, brandishing a sheaf of lilies ?"

"And why not ?"

"Well, really, Evelyn, in view of all the facts, do you quite see me in white ?"

He stroked his chin and nodded thoughtfully. "I see your point, Sophy. Perhaps white with black spots would be more suitable."

Seeing him off, she leaned through the window of the Bristol and patted his cheek.

"Before you go, Evelyn, there's just one point. I should hate you to think that you are marrying a fool."

"Meaning what ?"

"That I want you to know that I didn't believe a

word of what you said this afternoon. *You were* kicked into this by Rolo and the others, weren't you?"

He laughed and threw out his hands. "As a matter of fact, I was, bless their souls. But how did you guess? I thought I was lying particularly smoothly. I hope I didn't tremble or change colour. If so, I must be losing my technique."

"Too smoothly. I haven't known you for thirty years without grasping the fact that the only time you blush is when you tell the truth."

As he put the car in motion, she halted him with an urgent cry.

"Evelyn! I nearly forgot. The honeymoon. Where are we going? Foreign parts, I do hope. Think it over, and let me have your suggestions as soon as possible."

"I don't need to think it over, my dear. Spain, of course. There's nothing like an afternoon at the bull-ring for inflaming the animal passions."

RUPERT, Louise, Rose and Vivian were strolling along the Rambla of San Feliú del Mar towards their favourite bar. It was one o'clock in the morning and the melodramatic scenery of the Costa Brava deployed itself like a travel agent's brochure under the soft clear moonlight.

Rupert quickened the pace : " I do wish we didn't all look so blatantly newlywed. I find it most embarrassing. Let's get drinking and see if we can't dispel this smog of domesticity."

They jostled down the stone steps into the long narrow semi-basement. The rough wood tables and benches were crowded as usual with a mixture of mahogany-coloured fishermen, carefully pale town types, and half-cooked tourists. The two handsome guitarists were in full song, the throop of their instruments and the hard virile timbre of their voices pulsing through the fog of smoke and wine fumes. Meanwhile, with unshakable Spanish courtesy, they patiently submitted to the alcoholic advances of the female holiday-makers.

Rupert and his party eased their way on to one of the benches and signalled for porrons of raw brown wine. Presently they began to feel more cheerful ; especially Rose who handled her drinking vessel with remarkable virtuosity. Grasping the open spout with the expert's backhand grip, she reclined on Vivian's bosom, directing the thread of liquor from the jet-spout between her lips with the utmost precision. At

the same time she operated her arm in the manner of a trombone player, now reducing the thread to a mere two inches, now extending it to a good two feet. Finally she cut off the fountain with a clean flick of the wrist, and collapsed panting, amidst a chorus of appreciative Olés.

Louise, meanwhile, was turning the pages of an English newspaper which she had picked up off the floor. Suddenly she slapped it down on the table with a cry of excitement.

"I say, look! They've done it. Two solid columns, and pictures as well. UNCLE NED WED."

Rupert snatched the paper from her. "My word, you're right, and no mistake about it. And in Elmbury Cathedral, too, with Theo. Crozier officiating. They've certainly lost no time."

When the hysteria had abated, Rupert reassembled the fragments of the newspaper and read the account more carefully.

"Ambrose Bainister was best man, I see. And Minnie Blazer and Ursula Vervain, bridesmaids. How perfectly sweet."

"What about the guard of honour?" enquired Vivian. "I seem to remember that Evelyn once had connections with the V.C.E."

"Quite so. And here they are. An archway of swords and all the rest of the nonsense, with Splasher Grummit in the forefront, grinning like a dingo."

"What a shame we missed it," said Rose. "I should have cried my eyes out, and I bet the champagne was first class."

"Does it say anything about the honeymoon?" enquired Louise.

Rupert applied himself again to the text. "Let me

see . . . the honeymoon . . . yes, here we are. Good God! It says 'Spain.' How old is this paper? Forty-eight hours. Do you realise, my pets, that those two are in the country at this very moment."

Louise sighed and shook her head. "Not a hope of our meeting them, I'm afraid. You know Evelyn's passion for culture. Unless I'm much mistaken, poor Sophy will spend her honeymoon tramping round the Prado."

Rupert nodded and pushed the paper aside. "No doubt you're right. And very fit and proper, too. After all the recent storm and stress, it's high time that everybody settled down."

They relaxed over the table, pleasantly drowsy with the day's sunshine and the wine.

"It was fun whilst it lasted," mused Rose. "But it's just as well we managed to bring Sophy to heel. After all, they're none of them so young as they were, and it would really have been rather a shame to shatter their hard-won respectability with a lot of ancient scandal."

"You're right," said Louise. "And it makes me very happy to know that we were the two who saved the situation." She looked around with a slightly maudlin smile. "I shall often think of them in the years to come, living out the time that remains to them in distinguished service to their country, setting an example to the younger generation, of selfless devotion to public duty."

"True, true," agreed Rupert. "How clearly I see them, as the eventide of life closes in, nodding by their firesides, looking back over the panorama of time past, scarcely believing that it was really they who, as Sophy's Circus, won an international renown for . . . Good God! What's that?"

The buzz of conversation in the bar was interrupted by a sudden uproar from the street outside. There was the sound of raucous cheering, the stamping of running feet. The din drew nearer, now punctuated by detonations like rifle shots, and by a low, ominous honking like a sea-lioness in labour.

The crowd in the bar sprang to their feet and began to scramble over the benches and tables towards the narrow doorway. Rupert and his party were swept up and borne forward in the crush.

"What is it?" yelled Louise. "What is it?"

"If you ask me," snapped Vivian, clasping Rose to his breast, "it's a bloody revolution."

At that moment the customers nearest the door suddenly shrieked and thrust back into the room, fighting madly to get away from the threshold. An instant later, a tall black mass loomed out of the night and, with a terrible crash, plunged down the tavern steps to wedge itself in the doorway.

"Dear heaven," cried Rupert, "it's Sophy's Daimler."

Dragging Louise by the hand, he scrambled forward into the front row of spectators. The view was noteworthy.

The Daimler, was canted forward at an angle of forty-five degrees, its bonnet crushed against the door-posts. Sophy was at the wheel, smiling delightedly and madly squeezing the bulb-horn with both hands. Ambrose Bannister and Minnie Blazer were prone on the roof, raking the onlookers with soda-syphons. Splasher Grummit was leaning out of the rear compartment, doggedly winding a hunting horn; and Sir Roland Gander, blissfully blind-drunk, was strapped to the luggage rack in rear. The Bishop of Elmbury,

fulfilling his customary task of navigator, was seated astride the bonnet, monotonously reciting the Prædial Service.

"But where's Evelyn?" cried Louise. "I can't see Evelyn."

"Evelyn Chancery at your service," said a frisky voice behind them.

They turned about to find him smiling into their faces, a porron of wine in either hand. He jabbed a spout into Rupert's ribs and winked atrociously.

"Trust your old Uncle to find his way around the blind side, eh, my boy? By heaven, I'm dry!"

With this, he raised both arms and shot a pair of hissing jets between his gaping jaws. Then he slammed the porrons on the bar and rubbed his hands.

"That's that. And now, my children, if you want to see the way to take a town apart, here's your chance. Sophy's Circus is feeling rather bored."

THE END



